

The Human Rights Performative: The Belarus Free Theater on the Global Stage

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, who taught me the power of translation.

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INTRODUCTION

Toward the *Human Rights Performative*: The Belarus Free Theater on the Global Stage

To say that humanity is a product-effect does not mean that humanity is a myth or a mere ideological abstraction. [...] humanity-effects are real and efficacious, and can be progressive and enabling. It is therefore a matter of situating such humanity-effects in terms of their conditions of possibility and actuality, and also their limits. How do these effects constrain lives? [...] This should be the task of the humanities, whose contribution to the study of globalization would be the articulation of a framework that renders intelligible the inhuman ways of achieving humanity in the contemporary world.

– Pheng Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 10

Background

In early 2011, the Belarus Free Theater (BFT) was catapulted to fame on the arts and culture pages of the *New York Times*. The premiere liberal newspaper in the United States profiled the BFT in the aftermath of the Belarusian political elections on December 19th 2010, when members of the company, along with other political activists, were arrested in the city center of Minsk for participating in a mass protest against the allegedly rigged re-election of the Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko. At the time of the 2010 election, the BFT was a theater company based in Minsk that had already gained an international reputation in the UK as a human rights theater collective that worked outside the system of heavily state-sponsored theater production in Belarus. The company created theater projects that addressed social issues regarded as taboo in Belarus, such as mental health and minority rights of women and the LGTBQ community, as well as

dissenting political voices.¹ Through the seven articles that appeared in the *New York Times* over a five-month period between January-May 2011, US audiences were brought into the fold of a story of the BFT's survival after the crackdown following the Belarusian elections. The focal points of this narrative were the chance release from jail of a company member, the company's clandestine journey from Belarus to the US to perform at the Under the Radar Festival, and the "extraordinary" performance of their play *Being Harold Pinter* at the festival (Brantley, "Political Theater").

In conjunction with the BFT's performance of *Being Harold Pinter*, a solidarity event of multiple staged readings of the same play were organized by over a half-dozen theatres in the US. These companies joined the BFT to raise awareness about the imprisonment of the political opposition in Belarus and helped to secure material resources for the company's extended stay in the US. The basic assumption that underpinned the solidarity event was that theatre makers across national divides could rally together under a slogan of "Artistic Freedom". In a press release for the most high profile of these events at The Public Theater in NYC, Artistic Director Oskar Eustis categorized the BFT as follows:

Artistic freedom has a new and powerful symbol: the Belarus Free Theater. Their work is passionate, brilliant and immediate; their lives are outspoken and courageous: their theater is fighting for their country, and for all of us. They deserve our unstinting support and solidarity. ("*Being Harold Pinter* Adds Encore Benefit Performance...")

¹ The company uses the qualification of taboo in addressing their own work on Belarusian social issues. On a discussion on how the company organized a workshop to determine taboo topics see Elphick 115-116.

According to this statement, the discursive workings of the right to artistic freedom were transnational – indeed universalizing—tool that could transcend borders and justify the need for solidarity with the Belarusian artists. When Eustis declares that the company’s fight is not just for “their country” but “for all of us”, he positions artistic freedom as a kind of open project of importance to those in Belarus as well as in the US. Such a qualification located artistic freedom within the larger discourse of human rights, rooted in the reference to a presumably self-evident and cohesive set of rights that are understood to be “for all of us” across the world. This universalizing effect was secured through the BFT’s virtuosic bodies of struggle that were deemed exceptional—passionate, brilliant, immediate, outspoken, courageous—and in their exception most capable of fighting for the benefit of a general humanity. As such, the solidarity event harnessed the particular bodies of Belarusian artists and yoked them to a politics of universality. “Artistic freedom” was a universalizing tool that built an imaginary global community that enabled the BFT to gain a place as an international human rights theater *par excellence*. Why did the BFT become a prized human rights theater in 2011?

Although the solidarity campaign in 2011 utilized the liberal discourse of “artistic freedom” and its ancillary “free speech”, the universal appeal of these concepts was contested during the campaign. The campaign itself was the platform through which these ideals were debated and tested as US audiences, the media and the BFT itself tried to calibrate the distinction between the company’s value as a political theater and its value as a human rights theater. Following up his assertion that the BFT is a powerful symbol for “all of us”, Oskar Eustis was adamant to remark to the press that by supporting the BFT he was *not* supporting a foreign regime change, but rather, artistic

freedom as a human right (Shusman and Weaver, “Artists Hold NYC Protest Against Belarus”). Eustis rhetorically disassociated artistic freedom from political freedom by positioning it as an aspect of social life rather than a political position in relation to governmental political structures. He disputed the framing of the BFT as a political theater that asserted a specific oppositional position with the national context of Belarusian politics and instead positioned the company as a human rights theater that spoke to universal rights against generalized forms of domination. Even though the narrative of the BFT’s arrests was decidedly linked to their activities as part of the political opposition, the BFT’s US allies were quick to re-route politics away from its relationship with regime change and toward a politics of human rights whose flexible set of ideals could transcend the particular political situation in the nation-state of Belarus. US audiences were wary of speaking against political regime changes in Belarus and therefore the BFT was more easily digestible for solidarity by liberal US audiences if it appealed to general issue of domination. The maneuver to distinguish the BFT as a human rights theater was never tidy and the press was frequently anxious that an alliance with this company would mean support for regime change.

This anxiety around advocating for foreign regime change and political trajectories has historically underpinned the emergence of the human rights movement. According to human rights historian Samuel Moyn, human rights came to function as the protocol for international relations in the 1970s, when controversial political alternatives no longer seemed feasible. Although a modern human rights charter was legally institutionalized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, Moyn argues that human rights only become an active agent in negotiating international economic and

political policies in the 1970s after there was an exhaustion with reform schemes in both the East (behind the Iron Curtain) and the West (with the collapse of the student dissent). In the 70s, human rights came to serve as a “moral calculus” of consensus precisely when it seemed impossible to dream of a better world the “old” way: by proposing a genuine and controversial political alternative (49). Since the 70s, international relations became increasingly linked to human rights as a negotiating factor for legitimating free market economic policies and international security coalitions. In this way, the solidarity campaign on behalf of the BFT in 2011 mobilized a familiar discourse of human rights that provided a common platform of international moral ideals that did not need to succumb to the “old” problem of political ideology. Political theater as a partisan politics was unsavory for international solidarity whereas human rights theater could form a global coalition by avoiding the dangers of politics that would require audiences to advocate for a political trajectory in Belarus. “Artistic freedom” and “free speech” were useful conduits for action for US audiences because they were elevated to a universal cause rather than a partisan political problem.

In addition, the solidarity event also resuscitated an older form of human rights discourse rooted in the Cold War rhetoric of “artistic freedom” and “free speech”. Since the 70s the discourse of human rights has changed as new categories of rights have come under its umbrella. These new issues of human rights were not attached to state censorship and political violence but to questions as racial injustice, women’s liberation, ethnic violence, indigenous rights and neoliberal economic restructuring.² Solidarity with the BFT in 2011 allowed for a specific set of human rights concerns to gain potency

² See section on “racial cartographies” for more detailed historical placing of these rights.

through the fragile, and yet heroic, bodies of the Belarusian artists while equally masking from other forms of violence that had entered the human rights cannon since the 70s. Significantly, the human rights issues obscured in solidarity with the BFT were ones that could mirror back to US audiences their own histories of racial and economic divisions. Therefore, the liberal audiences put their trust in the BFT not simply because they symbolized a familiar discourse of “artistic freedom”, but because the bodies of the BFT provided a safe refractive surface of Belarus through which to trespass to universality. The virtuosity of the BFT’s bodies was precisely their ability to refract a global community through the safe passage of white, European Belarus. On the pages of the *New York Times* and elsewhere, a delicate dance took place. One that positioned the BFT as a human rights theater company *par excellence* while simultaneously rejecting the implication that their work had a political meaning.

The appeal to human rights theater was also a strategy for the BFT itself. Human rights allowed the company to shift its identity to avoid the problem of a politicization of Belarusian arts and cultural practices abroad since the mid-2000s. The same year that the BFT presented their production *Being Harold Pinter* in NYC, an international exhibition of Belarusian art was organized by the Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius, Lithuania.³ The exhibition was titled *Opening the Door?: Belarusian Art Today*. This neighborly international exhibition utilized the spatial metaphor of the door to prompt a conversation about the distance between the bordering countries of Lithuania and Belarus. The mission of the project was expressed as follows:

³ I saw this exhibition when it was presented at the Zacheta Art Gallery in Warsaw, Poland in 2011.

“Everyone in Vilnius knows that Minsk is in fact somewhere not far away, but it’s only when you go there that you really take it in that the capital of another country is in fact closer than the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda. However, when you’re waiting for the half an hour or an hour in the queue at the border, the distance increases again’—said Kęstutis Kuizinas. The aim of this conversation, as well as the exhibition itself, is to try to find out how far from or close to Lithuania is Belarus. (Exhibition Brochure)

As the statement announces, the exhibition aimed at a conversation about border relations. But instead, it spurred a debate about the very framework of the border through which Belarusian artworks were presented abroad and received by international audiences. In a critical essay published by the organizers of the exhibition, Belarusian art critic Svetlana Poluchek described how the framework of *Opening the Door?* instrumentalized the Belarusian art objects by making them perform politics. She cites a review of the exhibition that critiqued how “all the works and objects are precisely and elegantly configured to suit the general idea. This justifies a light and logical reading of the exhibition, it gives freedom for each work in the space and links it to the following and preceding work. But this is precisely what gives cause for concern: the politicization of even non-political themes and objects” (Tatiana Fedorenko qtd. in Poluchek).

This critique of the exhibition’s “politicization of even non-political themes and objects” de-naturalized assumptions about the benign value of touring and exhibiting politically engaged cultural practices. Although it seemed necessary for Belarusian art

practices to speak to politics,⁴ critics questioned the politics of representing Belarusian art beyond the borders of Belarus if the exhibitions turned out to always be political, “as though Belarus presents an interest (and is understandable for a foreign viewer) only as one big political *trouble*” (Poluchek). The critics were wary of the ideological affects of the politicization of their work through the spatial metaphor of the door, which demarcated an inside and an outside between Belarusian and Lithuanian/EU spaces as a political divide rather than artistic or cultural difference. Although the exhibition allowed for Belarusian artworks to flow across the border, it made them valuable as political objects and *not* because of their artistic or cultural characteristics. The paradigm established valued artworks in reaction and/or resistance to the political situation in Belarus. The problem of organizing the flow of artistic practices through the spatial and temporal logic of the “door” was that it seamlessly organizes cultural objects through the reference to a divide determined by a presumed political reality, usually one that is violent and oppressive and in *trouble*. It created an opening only to the extent that it first presumed a separation between the less “open” or illiberal political situation in Belarus and the far more liberal political situation in its neighboring countries of Lithuania (and other neighboring Central European EU countries).⁵ Belarus was *already* familiar as a

⁴ The politicization of Belarusian art was favorably approached by Polchuck as a *vertical* issue within the sphere of Belarusian art production. She writes that political engagement is important in Belarusian art since the main institutions have embraced for too long universal values and timeless classics, what she refers to as the “ancient monasteries of the sublime”. See Poluchek, “Heavy Duty of Belarusian Art”.

⁵ The architectural regime of opening/closing the door produced a temporal historicizing effect through which art practices were understood between the inside (Belarus) and the outside (EU). The temporal dimension of Belarusian isolationism is associated with the narrative of Belarus’ “time-warp”. The narrative of the “time-warp” is often how the country is positioned in political discourses of post-Soviet transition—a term that defines a trajectory of movement toward liberal democracy of countries that were part of the former Soviet block.⁵ The narrative of the “time-warp” holds that Belarus is encountering its past rather than its liberal future in distinction to the progressive forward movement toward capitalism and the EU of its neighboring countries. The door underscores a division not only across space but also across time.

political problem encased within the territorial border of the nation-state. Thus a specific discriminatory program of distribution emerged: the door underwrote that the art that flows from certain places, such as Belarus, is “politics” and the art that flows from other places is “culture”.

The artistic stakes of circulating Belarusian art as “politics” were high. The technical craft and artistic vision of the artworks was not simply ignored by the curators of the exhibition as much as the exhibition itself de-valued the artistic quality of the Belarusian objects. The exhibition positioned Belarusian art as outmoded, out-of-sync and artistically inferior to its counterparts in the EU simply because it did not have the chance to mature under conditions of liberal openness. To counteract this production of difference in the exhibition, Poluchek noted that artists who participated in the event attempted to assert the “neutral” or “human” character of their artwork and claimed the right to represent not just the Belarusian “here and now” but global themes that were not circumscribed by Belarus-specific meaning (cited in Poluchek). Siarhej Liubimau, professor of urban studies at the European Humanities University (EHU), stressed the need for a different framework for Belarusian art exhibitions. He critiqued the politics embedded in the curatorial frame of the door that tried to measure the distance between Vilnius and Minsk in order to understand why “we have known little about Belarus and its people”. To this division between the countries, Liubimau responds: “what is ‘we’ and what is ‘have known’, since, I thought, it is difficult to find a taxi driver in Vilnius who would not work on Belarusian gas” (Liubimau). Thus, he argued that one of the unspoken rules of the exhibition were that it solidified the national imaginary of Lithuania as a liberal Western democratic nation through the negative neighborly image of illiberal

Belarus. His materialist narrative of gas exchange between Belarus and Vilnius challenged the presumption of distance between the two countries by pointing out how the two spaces are bound together in economic interconnectivity rather than the separations of political freedom.

Similarly, the BFT struggled against the politicization of their theater work in its international reception. In 2007 the company received two international prizes: a special mention for The Europe Theater Prize and The French Republic's Human Rights Prize. The company's reaction to the two prizes was telling and co-artistic director Natalia Koliada expressed the difference between the two as such:

It was "very sad that the Europe Theatre Prize's special mention was given not for artistic choice" but for the company's position against the Belarusian regime. In contrast, the human-rights prize "was an honor for us" [...] "in this case, the prize was for our artistic work—they totally supported our aesthetic choices (qtd. in American Theater Magazine 2009).

Koliada's comment demonstrates that the company rejected the first prize because it was awarded to the company for its political position against the government and not for the company's artistic choices. The reduction of the BFT's work as "political" created a barrier for the reception of their theater based on artistic merits. It circumscribed the company's significance only in relation to the Belarusian political opposition. The French Republic's Human Rights prize, on the other hand, allowed for their artistic work to be put into relationship with a broader international audience through the worlding force of

aesthetic judgment that allowed the BFT to speak as artists. Although it is unclear what parameters a human rights prize would evoke to judge the artistic merits of the BFT, what was registered in Koliada's remarks was a desire of the company to escape the limit of Belarus as a political marker. They motioned to put their artistic work, rather than political position, on the international agenda.

Stakes

In this dissertation, I argue that the BFT rejected the politicization of theater work that trapped the company within an isolationist narrative of Belarus and reduced the reception of their work to a political position for/against the government of Belarus. This narrative created a division that incarcerated the theater within the particular political situation in Belarus. To challenge this paradigm the company adopted a different approach than the artists in the *Opening the Door?* exhibition who affirmed the neutrality of their art. Since the BFT's work was socio-political in content, they opted to re-route their work away from politics and toward the ethical ideals of human rights that could maneuver against the restrictions of a politicized isolationist narrative of Belarus. As early as 2007, human rights became the BFT's chosen program for positioning their theater abroad in two ways: First, human rights theater averted from the dangers of speaking to regime changes and political alternatives. By embracing universal ideals such as "artistic freedom" and "free speech", the BFT could disassociate from oppositional politics and deliver a general message about oppression and domination. This allowed the BFT to speak for "all of us" without alienating Western international audiences who were anxious about embracing a political theater company that proposed political regime change; Second, human rights

theater allows the BFT to embrace an inclusive and connective frame of a “global context” rather than the particular frame of “national context”. In positioning themselves within a global picture of human rights abuses the company sought to re-value their work from the entrenched nation-state paradigm that looked to the company to provide empirical information about political trouble in Belarus. They actively promoted a universal imaginary to escape the politicization of art from Belarus. In these two ways, the BFT fought to become an international human rights theater that desired to avoid both the “old” politics of political theater and likewise the “new” politicization of Belarusian theater practices since the mid-2000s.

Drawing on the case study of the BFT, the aim of this dissertation is to address the *becoming human rights* of Belarusian cultural practices in the international cultural sphere. I approach the BFT’s two-fold human rights maneuver against the politicization of Belarusian theater as the site from which to glean a politics of human rights in global theater production. This means that instead of reading the BFT as a resistive or liberatory practice that pressures the political situation within a nation-state paradigm, I do the opposite: I situate how their translation onto the global stage corresponds with a politics against “politics” that is indicative of the mechanism of liberal theatrical production. This has been a missing focus in scholarship about the company, most of which exclusively considers the company’s political significance in relationship to the Belarusian state (Bekus: 2010; Elphick: 2014; Gener: 2009). When the company is treated as a human rights theater in scholarship (Phillips: 2011; Zaiontz: 2013) the distinction between politics and human rights is collapsed and the company amorphously continues to be located in relation to the mechanisms of production in Belarus. In distinction, my project

understands human rights as a process of translation that moves the BFT's theater into the sphere of global production and that likewise demands of them a specific repertoire of performances. Rather than a set of predetermined, self-evident human values established in international agreements in important years such as 1948 or 1975,⁶ I argue that human rights is a mode of production that manages and re-routes political theater into human rights theater as an international relation. I interpret human rights as a mode of aesthetic and bodily production and look to performance as a site from which to grasp the ways of embodying, and participating in, a global political economy of human rights. I refer to this practice as the *human rights performative*.

In this light, this dissertation poses questions about human rights specific to the field of theater and performance studies: What performance standards allow Belarusian theater practices to become human rights theater of importance to an international community? How do theater companies from the fringes of Europe (non EU) adapt aesthetic techniques to fit human rights discourses and how do they challenge these protocols that create seamless bridging across different places? The aim of this dissertation is to understand the stakes of the *human rights performative*—the program of universality as it manifests in an aesthetic and embodied register. In examining the specific bodily practices that constitute human rights connectivity, I engage in how performance mandates the separation of bodies that it proposes to include along the lines of race, gendered, class and nation.

⁶ 1948 is the date when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed. 1975 refers to the signing of the Helsinki Accords. More details about the significance of the Helsinki Accord are provided later in the introduction.

The Belarus Free Theater

Belarus is a country of around ten million people, situated between Russia and Poland to the east, and Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine to the north-south. Prior to 1991, it was one of the sixteen Soviet Republics and gained independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union on August 25, 1991. Whereas Belarus's neighboring countries have actively sought to rewrite their national histories in the post-Cold War moment—highlighting their colonial relation with the Soviet Union—this country's path to self-determination has followed a different trajectory. Belarus has reconciled its Soviet past rather than broken away from it. On an economic level, the country has retained a more socialist model of production with many sectors of its economy falling under the regulation of the state. Politically, it is aligned with Russia rather than the European Union. This different trajectory is attributed to the regime of current president Alexander Lukashenko (in power since 1994), and has fueled significant debate about the future of the country and its geo-political alliances.⁷

The BFT emerged from within the crucible of debates about Belarus's national identity. The company was founded in 2005 in Minsk by husband-and-wife team Nikolai Khalezin and Natalia Koliada. Koliada is part of a prominent theater family in Minsk and the daughter of a former professor at the Belarusian Academy of Arts. Khalezin is a journalist and playwright who won a prize in Moscow that financed the BFT's first project: a playwriting competition to support the development of original drama in Belarus. The event was groundbreaking in the Belarusian context because it “discovered”

⁷ On debates related to national identity in Belarus, see Bekus, particularly her chapter on the Belarus Free Theater, and Renee L. Buhr, et al 425-440. Additionally, I am referencing in this section historical literature about Belarus, see Zaprudnik:1993, Marples:1999, and Wilson: 2011.

a generation of writers whose work had not had an opportunity to surface in a country where drama had to pass the censorship of the Ministry of Culture in order to be produced in state-run theaters. Soon after, the duo partnered with artistic director Vladimir Scherban and began to create their own devised theater work, addressing the question of national identification in Belarus and exploring topics kept silent in the state-run media outlets. Their first piece, *We. Self-Identification*, was constructed through verbatim-style dialogues recorded “from below” at the construction site of the National Library of Belarus. This gave voice to subjectivities within the nation that were erased from sight in the homogenous, unified, and dignified vision of the country embodied in the grand project of the National Library.⁸ In their next production, *Zone of Silence* – which artistic director Vladimir Scherban considers to be the piece that ‘solidified’ their approach to theater⁹ – the company expanded their devising methodology to include oral histories, newspaper articles, autobiographical stories from the actors, and statistical research. Formally, the BFT discarded the conventions of sets, elaborate costuming, and musical scores in favor of minimalistic staging with everyday noise and sounds. In both content and form, their work marked a forceful departure from the repertoire of classical realist drama in the state-theaters and their version of Belarusian-ness exempt of swearing, nudity, and politics. The BFT is regarded by Belarusian scholars such as Nelly Bekus as an alternative theater because their work *represents an alternative Belarusian national identity* in juxtaposition to the official images distributed through the state apparatus.¹⁰

⁸ Bekus 235-238.

⁹ Vladimir Scherban shared this with me in a personal interview conducted in 2013.

¹⁰ See Bekus 235-248.

Additionally, the BFT's alternative-ness has to do with what theater scholar Taciana Arcimovič identifies as their "free" *mode of production*, referring to the independent creation of theater in relation to state models of theatre production ("Alternative Theater"). While most alternative companies in Belarus have to negotiate with the state apparatus to secure legal status, funding, and rehearsal space, the BFT is uniquely a completely independent player within the system and draws on private forms of support and money collected abroad to finance their work. Their existence in Belarus remains precarious: they have been denied registration with the Ministry of Culture and have struggled to secure rehearsal and performance spaces because a reputation has built around them for politicizing drama as an extension of its co-founders' affiliation with political campaigning.

Although BFT is highly acclaimed abroad for their human rights agenda, association with them locally is sometimes risky business. The company has been periodically pressured by the police and in the summer of 2007 the private house in which they perform was "cordoned off by secret service officers, and members of the troupe along with all fifty spectators who were there at the time were arrested" (Khalezin and Koliada 70). The original group of actors in the company and the artistic director, Vladimir Scherban, all of whom simultaneously worked/held stable jobs at state theaters, have been squeezed out of their government jobs and become un-hirable for other projects. Their underground, or vagabond, existence has led scholars such as Kathleen Elphick to point out that the 'political' nature of the company lies in their attempt to reconfigure the spaces that delimit who can speak within the public sphere and who is relegated to silence (124). In this way, their alternative-ness might have less to do with

whether or not the content of their work represents a political position (i.e. anti-Lukashenko) but with the way that it functions to produce an alternative public sphere.¹¹

A significant complication in relation to the BFT is the way that this company is considered a political theater in activist art circles in Belarus and in conjunction represents universal values as a human rights theater abroad. Political scientist Nelly Bekus identifies the BFT's documentary practice as having political importance in the social context of Belarus. For Bekus, the definition of politics is not "political talk"—an expression of a political idea or agenda—but the orientation of the BFT's documentary practice toward the alternative subject position expressing the "other side" of the national body (Bekus 235-248).¹² In Belarus, the BFT was an early adaptor of documentary theater practices whose political function was the theater's relentless pursuit of the reality of marginalized positions within Belarus. The company has defended this work as politics against a backdrop of critique within the country, arguing "we do not see politics as a dirty word" (Khalezin media interview).

This desire to assert politics and make it not seen as a "dirty word" corresponds to a generational rift between the old and new guards of experimental artistic practice in Belarus. In my ethnographic research in Minsk conducted over five years from 2011 to

¹¹Members of the BFT were publically involved in the campaigns of the political opposition in Belarus, and left the country as exiles in the aftermath of the December 2010 re-election of president Alexander Lukashenko. Prior to their re-location to London, the BFT already had an international reputation in Western Europe and the United States as a human rights theater. In 2007 they received the French Republic's In Defense of Human Rights award and that year had a high profile showing of their work *Being Harold Pinter* at the Soho Theater in London. In 2011, right after the elections in Belarus, they presented *Being Harold Pinter* in the US to massive critical acclaim – the *New York Times* featured them in seven articles over the course of four months. The company, founded in 2005 in Minsk, has become symbolic in the international arena of an activist theater practice that addresses political oppression in Belarus and social issues within the country deemed "taboo".

¹² Other scholars, such as Kathleen Elphick, see the political importance of the BFT's practice less in line with what they represent than their underground, or vagabond, existence. Their unofficial mode of production is political in that it reconfigures the spaces that delimit who can speak within the public sphere and who is relegated to silence. See Elphick 124.

2016, the younger generation of liberal and pro-European artists I spoke with, as well as their independent art publications, highlighted the activist function of cultural practices.¹³ This is a marked shift in the relationship between theater practice and politics from what anthropologist Andrei Yurchak calls the “late Soviet generation” of the 1980s. According to Yurchak, the late Soviet generation of experimental artists in the major capitals embraced an anti-political stance because they were disenchanted with politics. They believed politics to traffic in binaries between the East and the West and their aesthetic practices rejected this resistance/collaboration paradigm of Cold War discourse (205-224). In reaction to the ideological saturation of the public sphere through state media apparatus, these artists dismantled political positions altogether in favor of an ideal vision of common humanity that appealed to “universal values” in their works (205). Yurchak refers to this as a Soviet postmodernism because of its favoring of political indeterminacy through aesthetics of irony and playfulness. Today, the BFT and their counterparts in Minsk embody a growing dissatisfaction with this older aesthetic program of universal values and political indeterminacy, which they believe retreats from the real conditions of social life.

While members of the BFT are embedded in a cultural climate that asserts activism and a focus on political realities in Belarusian theater, they also are positioned as champions of universal values in the circulation of their theater projects abroad. The same theater production that Nelly Bekus reads as “political” because it represents alternative subjectivities in Belarus, is also evaluated as human rights theater by Brian

¹³ In Belarus, the advocacy for modes of socially engaged art can even be observed in the titles of the two important arts venues, pARTisan (founded in 2002) and the website ArtAktivist. The word “partisan” would be known to all Belarusians and refers to guerrilla fighters during WW2. Both reference the figures of an independent fighter and the activist.

Phillips, editor of the UK's *Journal of Human Rights Practice*. He describes the BFT's human rights theater practice as such:

“Zone of Silence... is a sublime collage of material that transports us into the heart of what it is like to live in Belarus today – complete with a series of incisive dramatic snapshots that include an improbably hilarious satirical take on human trafficking and even (again, most improbably) a gripping enactment of the consequences of chronic inattention to workplace safety concerns. But it is in the middle section of the piece that the BFT’s radical human rights theatre-making reaches its apotheosis. I use the word ‘radical’ here in the sense of a theatre practice that plumbs the very roots of that core assertion of the human rights project – what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) demands we recognize as the inherent and inviolable ‘dignity and worth of the human person’. This segment of ‘Zone of Silence’ consists entirely of monologues shaped by the actors from interviews they themselves conducted with a range of individuals living on the far edges of Belarusian society. Here they are simply given a stage – a hearing as human beings with voices and histories and a kind of cracked dignity that is their very own. After each monologue is performed, a clip from the video recording of the real life subject in interview is projected at the rear of the stage” (Phillips 329).

For Phillips, *Zone of Silence* distinguishes the BFT's documentary practice from “more traditional, documentary-bound” approaches in the deployment of the human body. The

physical mime work of the company, that includes dance sequences and evocative imagery, moves past the solely testimonial-based approach of verbatim-style documentary productions. For Phillips, the BFT unfolds aspects of human experience that are humorous and pleasurable in order to restore the dignity of the person to human rights theater. As such, Bekus appeals to the politics in the use of real dialogue in depicting marginal voices in Belarus whereas for Phillips the production's human rights-ness is its physical vocabulary that adds a fuller dimension to the bodily representation of the human.

Scholarly work on the BFT has yet to investigate this transaction in the BFT's work from the politics of Belarus into a universal program of human rights abroad. The distinction tends to be collapsed in newspaper articles and critical essays about the BFT and is underwritten by a silent assumption of the interchangeability of political theater and human rights theater. In this light, one of the goals of this dissertation is to highlight the dynamics that translates the political appeal of aesthetic practices within the nation-state into what Philips describes as the "dignity and worth of the human person". In order to do so, this dissertation links together the aesthetic practices of the BFT to a conflict between political alternatives and the moralistic utopia of the "human person" that scholars articulate as the geo-political function of human rights. The next section unpacks the geo-political function of human rights in two ways: as a racializing representational strategy and as an economic mode of inclusion/exclusion based on the universal equivalence of the body.

Human Rights Theater as a Field

Racial Cartographies

Scholarship on “human rights” is a relatively recent phenomenon in the field of theater and performance studies. Although it would seem as if the term should have entered the field much earlier considering the influence human rights discourse secured in international and domestic politics since the 1970s,¹⁴ English-language literature dedicated to human rights surfaced at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. The new field of human rights theater was announced in 2009, when Paul Rae published a book titled *Theater & Human Rights* in the Palgrave Macmillan series “Theater & Series”.¹⁵ This book served as an introduction to the field of human rights and theater and offered spaces for investigating the links between the two. Prior to this book there were a few articles published in theater journals on the subject, notably Paul Heritage’s 2004 *TDR* article “Taking Hostages: Staging Human Rights”. Following Rae’s publication, the term human rights forcefully entered the field with the publication of two manuscripts in 2010: Catherine Cole’s *Stages of Transition: Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission* and Soyini Madison’s *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance*. Both monographs deal with human rights within the framework of the nation—South Africa and Ghana, respectively—but look at two distinctly different sites of inquiry. Cole examines performance at a legal event known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa while Madison looks at grassroots political

¹⁴ See Moyn 49.

¹⁵ In the field of dance studies there was a 2008 anthology titled *Dance, Human Rights and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*. See Jackson and Shapiro-Phim.

organizing in Ghana and the creation of theater productions that address rights to natural resources and women's rights within the country.

These first monographs tether the term human rights to the global south. Their association with two African countries highlights an observation made by Rae in his analysis of the study of theater and human rights, namely the point that we tend to study theater and human rights not as a positive situation but as a *negative* one whereby human rights are only represented if they are deemed violated (Rae 13). It follows that one of the problems of studying human rights theater is that the correlation of the prism of violated human rights with case studies from the global south. This functions to underwrite a relation of alterity where certain humans, and certain nations, have human rights (therefore there is no need for representation) while others exist in a situation of lacking (and therefore are represented as victims of human rights violations). Although both Madison and Cole are careful to craft critiques of human rights representations it is important to pay attention to the distributions of space implicitly staged within the field of human rights theater.¹⁶ If those violated "humans" that serve as the focal point of representation in human rights theater are tethered to communities from the global south then the field of human rights reproduces the paradigm of the invisible north and all-too-visible south, which is likewise a racialized production of an invisible whiteness and visibly non-white Other. The historical and material effects of this division of spaces under human rights discourses has led postcolonial scholar Mukua Mutta to describe the human rights movement as "a civilizing crusade aimed primarily at the third world" (Mutta quoted in Acker, 6).

¹⁶ Madison does not solely address human rights violations as issues of state-enforced violence but equally through the disenfranchisement of Ghanaian people through the workings of global capitalism.

Human rights theater practices are thus already implicated with the divisions of alterity produced by the naming operation. This is one of the reasons that Paul Heritage, in his 2004 article “Staging Human Rights”, describes his surprise when he finds out, while working on a theater project in Brazil, that “human rights was a disgusting phrase” for the Brazilians in the room even though he had assumed that human rights would be the common starting point for their theater project, the benign equalizer as he describes (Heritage 97). His assumptions register the historical effects of the spatial distribution of human rights that already made certain bodies react negatively to the promises of human rights as theatrical practice while other bodies, Heritage’s own, had naturalized human rights theater as a “benign equalizer” that would provide for transnational connectivity. Embedded within the larger framing of human rights, human rights theater as a field often draws on, and draws out, a racial cartography. Not surprisingly, studies on human rights and theater have grown tremendously from South America and the Middle East in addition to the African continent. Even when embracing a global framework, anthologies of human rights theater continue to outline the same regional and racial divisions about *where* human rights theater comes from and *who* lacks human rights. Human rights thus serve as the golden standard of values that produces a paradigm of alterity that makes the East hyper visible (because they lack rights) and the West invisible (because they have rights).

The subject of human rights and theater has also been addressed in relation to the region of Eastern Europe. However, there are no monographs published on the subject and most of the literature that has emerged in our field over the past ten years has been almost exclusively devoted to the Belarusian theater company, the BFT, in the form of

articles and recognition in human rights anthologies (Becker et al: 2012; Lunkhurst and Morin: 2015). This reduction and omission of work on human rights theater from the region is intriguing considering that the contemporary regime of human rights and its wide popular usage is acknowledged by scholars to have emerged with the crucible of Cold War international politics in the 1970s.¹⁷ In part, an explanation for this might be that the recent field of human rights theater in the US has embraced new sites of human rights concerns as announced in the anthology *Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First-Century Theater* published in 2013. This anthology marked a “global” shift in human rights theater scholarship that has occurred over the past five years in addressing global issues of human rights such as the effects of global capitalism and neoliberal market expansions as well as global cultures of surveillance and security after 9/11. This is a change from the Cold War bifurcation of human rights along the axis of “free speech” as it related to political violence inflicted by the state. It is also a shift away from paradigms of mass ethnic violence that dominated human rights discourse in the late 80s and 90s.¹⁸ Why then has interest in human rights theater from the region of Eastern Europe been reduced to just one company while the sites for human rights concerns have seemingly multiplied across the globe?

Critical to understanding the racial cartography of the field of human rights theater is the peculiar position that the BFT holds in the distribution of human rights to

¹⁷ It is equally intriguing considering that Belarus, Russia and other post-Soviet non-EU countries are frequently featured in Western media in light of human rights violations and that the social sciences in the US have continued to investigate the dynamic of human rights in this region.

¹⁸ In 1992, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, and in 1995 a Working Group on Minorities was established. These legal instruments coincided with associations of human rights violations and ethnic forms of genocide in, most notably, Rwanda in 1994.

theater practices around the world. The BFT both consolidates and magnifies attention to human rights theater. Whereas the endowment of human rights—which French philosopher Jacques Rancière describes as a form of charity where you “give human rights to others, like old clothing”—to theater projects from the global south has multiplied in scale and dispersed over the last two decades, the opposite has happened with the Eastern European region where a solidification has occurred and human rights theater has become emblemized in one company. This concentration of attention has allowed the BFT to take the mantle as a prized human rights theater company in the world. This should be seen as another strategy within the racial cartography of human rights theater. On one hand, the post-Cold War climate of human rights theater promotes the proliferation of human rights issues around the world to dilute the political field (and again targeting the global south, which only continues to lack more and more rights) and, on the other hand, it simultaneously consolidates attention to a company and crowns them the most virtuosic example of human rights theater and affords them the status of fighting “for us all” (as Eustis mentions).

This dissertation treats the performance of the BFT as the most virtuosic human rights theater on the global stage since the mid-2000s. Through them, the region of Eastern Europe, and specifically Belarus, was produced as the quintessential space for human rights violations. This was possible only through the mass appeal of their human rights agenda of “free speech” and “artistic freedom”. This agenda erased the possibility of *other* human rights concerns in the region and in Belarus by consolidating the company as representative of the territory. Additionally, this company was championed abroad because it erased the threat of racial and ethnic divides for the liberal audiences

who received the company on the global stage. One of the reasons the BFT filled the pages of the *New York Times* during the solidarity event in 2011 is that they are best suited to perform as the “benign equalizer” of human rights discourse. The company provided a perfect reflective surface through which liberal audiences could enhance their character of social activism without the threat of solidarity. Solidarity with the BFT did not produce the same sort of liberal anxiety of appropriating causes across a racial divide. It did not have to reflect on the privilege of Whiteness as a colonial or domestic history by refracting the image of the BFT, whose bodies stood in for liberal notions of human rights that were decidedly *not* about race. As such, solidarity with the BFT provides a perfect form of surrogation that resuscitated liberal Whiteness at a moment when it was threatened by a proliferation of human rights issues toward racial injustices, ethnic violence and forms of neoliberal economic disenfranchisement. The consolidation of the BFT within the human rights field was a regional and racial strategy that worked through the body of the BFT—at once foreign and lacking human rights but nonetheless from the global north, even if on the margins of Europe. If Jacques Rancière describes the distributive dynamic of human rights as a form of charity, then the example of the BFT seems to confound the unilateral direction of this charitable act. It would appear that the BFT is afforded a privileged space on the global stage precisely because it seems to have the most to “give back” to liberal audiences. They are the *perfect Other*.

Translating the Body: The Human Right Performative

In the current political European climate, human rights provides a significant barrier to entry to the EU as countries who seek membership into the EU are denied or accepted

based on their ability to claim a proper human rights record. As Moyn asserts, human rights binds together the international sphere through the image of a moral utopia that is, at the end, useful for refracting local political struggles within nation-states into the international arena as tools through which to expand global markets and establish international security organizations (Moyn 49).¹⁹ Highlighting this international dynamic, cultural theorist Gayatri Spivak has critiqued the way that human rights serves to co-opt liberation struggles in India. She finds that women's rights in India serve as an alibi in the international sphere to pave the way for economic development in non-Western countries (Spivak 279). Human rights are therefore agents in an international dynamic that moves local political struggles into the international sphere and refracts these struggles into universal and moral commitments. Although proposing a set of universal values connects people across the borders of nation-states, the workings of human rights have historically been linked to pro-Western desires and the process of economic and political exclusion of the Other, i.e. a non-Western liberal democratic country.

¹⁹ In "The Future of Human Rights", Samuel Moyn traces the historical use of human rights in international politics. In the mid-1970s legislation appeared that linked human rights to the restriction and expansion of trade agreements between nation-states. The Jackson-Vanik Trade Act of 1974 in the United States was set-up to prevent trade with non-market economies that did not allow for freedom of emigration. Targeting the Soviet Union, the Jackson-Vanik Trade Act mobilized the human right to "freedom of emigration" to act as a barrier to entry for trade negotiations with the intention to allow primarily Jewish people and other religious minorities to leave the Soviet bloc. The signing of the Helsinki Accords the following year, on August 1, 1975, further established the human rights of "fundamental freedoms of thought, consciousness and religion" and the "right to the self-determination of peoples" as protocols for international relations. Although signed by 35 countries, the Accords were focused on the Warsaw pact countries that came under Soviet governance in the aftermath of WW2. The Accords aimed to ease tensions between the East/West by providing moral commitments that could be agreed upon on an international level. In effect this agreement legitimized mass dissident movements across Warsaw pact countries that claimed independent status from the Soviet Union and ultimately led to the establishment of Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the world's largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization that mandates issues such as arms control and the promotion of human rights such as freedom of press and fair elections. In the 1970s human rights were thus established as a "moral calculus" fundamental to the establishment of both global markets and international security organizations that served to calibrate political struggles in the image of pro-Western ideals.

In the field of theater and human rights this “moral internationalism” serves as a critical focus point to examine the international circulation of national and/or regional theater production. In “Jalila Baccar and Tunisian Theater: ‘We Will Not Be Silent’”, theater scholar Marvin Carlson describes how the right to “freedom of speech” becomes jeopardized in its transaction from Tunisia to France through the figure of Tunisian theater director Jalila Baccar. Examining how “freedom of speech” is moved across local, national and international stages, Carlson writes that Baccar’s political activism on behalf of “free speech”—vital within the Tunisian context—becomes co-opted in the presentation of her work in France, Tunisia’s former colonizer. The advocacy of liberal French audiences serves a neocolonial function that demonstrates the “superior tolerance and cultural commitment of France over its former colony” (Carlson 198). The figure of the oppressed woman, Baccar, generated a heroic narrative for the former colonizer in order to rescue her from her oppressive countrymen. Although the universal appeal of human rights is that it syncs-up and connects spaces, the effect of circulating human rights theater is often the opposite. Not only is the oppression in another country (such as Tunisia) sensationalized, but the human rights violation seems to inspire the refraction of those victimized lives through the prism of Otherness. This Otherness does not exist *a priori* to its representation; the circulation of these productions establishes the divisions of racial and cultural alterity. More than a neutral concept for legal and economic control, “freedom of speech” is treated in recent theater studies as a theatrical transaction that attaches to specific bodies (such as Jaccars’) and that distributes moral values through the body along racial, cultural and gendered lines.²⁰

²⁰ This form of analysis is also mentioned in Acker’s book *Fictions of Dignity* in her review of the

Although important for comprehending the way that Western audiences make use of wounded bodies from other countries to underwrite their own superiority, I find that the above framework does not lend enough nuance to the workings of translation in this dynamic of international theatrical transactions. Such a framework leads to a stalemate between the progressive agenda of human rights theater and its post-colonial critique in the form of Orientalism. Interference within the international arena is read through the lens of liberal audiences who seek to impose their moral values of “superior tolerance” or “cultural commitment” on the foreign theater companies and productions. On the flip side the national level resists this domination of their political struggles by remaining silent about their local context. In this sense, theater productions are considered co-opted in their international circulation because they speak *too* much, i.e. make palatable local and national concerns for the demands of international audiences.

As a question of representation, human rights discourse threatens to make visible that which should more properly remain local or national. The bifurcating paradigm of speaking/not-speaking remains at the center of these studies, like the question of co-optation and resistance that presents two distinct spaces for political agency, the global stage and the home country. The problem is that it does little to understand the ways that theater companies appeal to, and manipulate, the dominant discourse of human rights and its values. Nor does it lend historical understanding to the qualities of performing human rights that are required of audiences and the human rights theater. In my ethnographic research I found that the BFT actively constructed and participated in the performance of illiberalness in a way that was not passive but relational to the audience. Additionally,

circulation of the literature genre called the “human rights bestseller”. See Acker 35-46.

liberal audiences were not always sure what they were getting with the BFT and, like Oskar Eustis, were perpetually anxious that the BFT would somehow perform politics rather than human rights. Thus a specific kind of performance of human rights was required of both the BFT and liberal audiences that was much murkier than the impositionary discourse of Orientalism would allow.

In this dissertation, I draw on theories of translation to understand the human rights performative. Contemporary post-colonial theories of translation have shifted away from regarding translation as the “truth of adequation” that stably transmits meaning from one location to another, examining instead the performative process of the movement of texts within different spatio-temporal conditions. Building on the work of poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Derrida, cultural theorist Naoki Sakai writes that translation does not form the ideal of a “bridge” between languages, but, on the contrary, it is translation that produces specific differences and power relations between cultures (16). Sakai effectively argues that translation can be understood as a specific act—a process of “doing”—invested with hegemonic power, which serves to increase the significance and expressiveness of one’s own culture by managing the frontiers with other cultures. By importing and affirming the nation’s connection and place in an unbroken lineage of Western civilization, translation serves a colonial function that separated different nation-states while presuming to connect them. In doing so it enhances and solidifies a cultural expressiveness for the translator while Othering the translated. Cultural theorist Shaden Tageldin takes a different approach to translation. She disputes the conventional understanding of colonial translation that regards translations as either imperialism or resistance. Tageldin demonstrates that translation

does not always happen through the imposition of another language but in the translational seduction of translating European works into the native language, what she calls “love” for the colonizer. She argues that the politics of translation as “love” is arguably the most potent affect of empire building (13). Like Sakai, who disputes the translational promise of the “bridge” as the benign equalizer between spaces, Tageldin disputes the love story between the colonized and the colonizer. Translation is revealed as a less than innocent affair of intimacy and connectivity. I find Sakai and Tageldin’s critiques of the translational ideal of the “bridge” a powerful tool for examining the BFT and the human rights performative. It requires that the universal ideals of human rights that serve to connect the BFT to global audiences be rethought as a colonizing force that does not work through imposition but through the seduction of its universal appeal. Such a conceptual framework allows for the formulation of a new question: How does the BFT participate in its own form of domination even as they are positioned as heroes of human rights survival? The participatory dimension of the BFT’s translation into human rights will be addressed in Chapter One. Chapter Two will discuss alternative forms of translation that challenge the stale mate of the speaking/silence paradigm that imagines local resistance as non-speaking and global domination as speaking.

Building on these two theorists of translation, the human rights performative that I examine emphasizes the body rather than language as translational. Whereas linguistic translation secured and distributed the borders of the nation-state through official translation (Sakai) and likewise territorial colonization through translation between native/colonial languages (Tageldin), human rights forms a connectivity that is first and foremost about the body. This is because one of the fictions of human rights is that it

protects not the nation-state as much as the marginalized body within the nation-state, or those that exist in excess of the rights granted by the state. Therefore linguistics secures a proper territory, whereas the body becomes the marker for human rights. The human rights aura of the “unspeakability” of violence strips the human of the linguistic domain and renders the body important in naked, deformed, broken and/or mutilated form. More than language, the translational regime of human rights is fundamentally about producing a human body. This corresponds to literature on human rights that has shown that rights that were once associated with belonging to the national community have become increasingly abstracted, and legitimized on the transnational level through the ideal of the person or individual (Soysal:2000; Mooney: 2014; Anker: 2012). Therefore, translation in human rights performance happens under a different set of rules than in linguistic translation between two or more territorially bound languages. The “bridge” in human rights translation does not connect two different national languages but connects nation to the human body in pure equivalence. The humanity-effect of human rights translation happens through a production of a human body that masks the translational act that created it. In other words, the body of human rights erases the translational act.

This dissertation responds to Pheng Cheah’s earlier call to examine the inhuman ways that “humanity” is constructed. I look to the body as both a site for the normative construction of a human body as well as the body as site of relational production that examines the question of “who?” the normative body includes and excludes. I trace the *human rights performative* as a form of exchange between the BFT and liberal audiences in the US and UK. This exchange in the sphere of cultural practices is closely tied to political economy of human rights in international affairs, although the currency that it

traffics is that of the human body. What kind of performance is required of the body of human rights? The three chapters in this dissertation identify three modalities of bodily performance: survival, testimony and sensation.

Chapter One brings into focus the human rights performative of survival. In this chapter, I analyze a 2015 performance event called *Staging A Revolution* that commemorates and celebrates the ten-year history of the BFT's repertoire. I argue that "survival" is a mode of historical production specific to the liberal discourse of human rights. Drawing on, and departing from, Joseph Roach's theorization of surrogation, I examine how the festival functions as a process of auditioning "candidates for succession" that replace the aging body of the BFT in relation to political struggles in Belarus with a surviving body that is abstracted from the historical process of politics. I argue that the surviving body of human rights is a fragile body that exists outside of institutionalized structures of power—a *history without history*—, which anticipates being restored not to history *per se* but to humanity. As a performance modality, survival demands that the BFT multiply social justice causes and sites of oppression through which they can continue to survive as a theater company on the global stage. *Staging A Revolution* is revealed as an anti-aging procedure: it unhinges the BFT from the Belarusian political context by elevating the body to universal value of survival that connects and absorbs a plethora of human rights issues from around the world. Simultaneously, the construction of the BFT as survivors also limits the company's possibility of integration within theater history since survival perpetually keeps a historical destination out of reach. The logic of human rights performance works through a therapeutic operation: it pays special attention to refugee bodies all the while limiting

their access to any real forms of health. In this process of surrogation, the body does not die but is kept alive. I argue that at *Staging A Revolution* the BFT was propped up as an ageless body—a suspended, precarious existence without a home—perfectly suited for a project of re-centering liberal identity and its white, European character. Instead of attending to the dead body as history-making as discussed in Roach, this chapter argues that we must interrogate the category of bodies produced as “living dead” survivors that has become a potent site for human rights performance.

In Chapter Two, I examine the labor of the female translator in the reproduction of knowledge about Belarusian context. I analyze three BFT productions performed in repertoire in Minsk to demonstrate how testimony functions as an embodied mode of human rights translation. Specifically, I investigate the over-exposure of the testifying female body, whose body is the site of transmission through which knowledge about Belarus is rendered intelligible to foreign audiences. The female body becomes the normative prism through which difference between liberal and illiberal contexts is constructed. I call this a *gendered prism of context* and demonstrate how the ideal of testimony has inevitably forced the BFT to speak through an over-determined idea of context: state-enforced political oppression and violence. I argue that the performative of testimony purports to reveal social context as a transparent and readily available “truth” through the female body, while simultaneously erasing the actual labor of the female translator in the testimonial exchange. The feminized testimonial body enacts a universalizing operation—care for the violated woman—that produces liberal/illiberal contexts while presuming that no translation is necessary, in other words, by presuming universality. Examining the labor of the female translator allows me to flip on its head a

conventional distinction between “testimony” and “context” in theater scholarship.

Instead of asking what kind of context is produced through testimony, I ask the opposite: what is the context that makes testimony possible? The feminist work of the translator provides an opening to consider the multidirectional translations of the BFT productions that cannot be reduced to a problematic division between liberal/illiberal contexts. These translations are never neutral and are performed within a relational field of investments and affiliations, which is the site of its politics.

Chapter Three treats the aesthetic production and exchange of the “human body” in human rights practice. I trace a history of the over-exposure of the human body in performances that render important and valuable the naked, defiled, wounded and otherwise dismembered body. Analyzing the BFT’s production of *Trash Cuisine*, I demonstrate how a protocol of performing the liberal human body has become untenable for the company in exile in 2011. Since their exile, the company has been trapped within a limited dramaturgy of identity that demands the company perform the particular role as Belarusian victims and expose their human bodies as a negative condition of rights within Belarus. I argue that this is a form of international diplomacy called “human rights realpolitik”—a term that defines the way that particular conception of the violated human body works to exclude the very bodies that perform violence in order to sustain the founding condition of an integrated liberal body. Drawing on the example of *Trash Cuisine*, I examine how this production responds to human rights realpolitik by experimenting with a “dramaturgy of sensation” that attempts to undo the politics of identity in favor of a political modality of dis-identification. *Trash Cuisine* works against the logics that stabilize the body and makes it distinct from other bodies. This rendition of

the human body opens toward an ethical consideration that political philosopher Erin Manning suggests is located in the possibility of the moving, sensing body to individuate in excess of stable identifications and solidified binaries between the Self/Other. The second half of the chapter considers the possibilities and limits of a “dramaturgy of sensation” in the global space of human rights production.

CHAPTER ONE

Surviving History: Liberal Gestures of Anti-Aging at *Staging A Revolution*

In a November 3, 2015 review of *Staging A Revolution*—a two-week long event in London, England showcasing ten productions from the Belarus Free Theater’s (BFT) theatrical history—theater critic Dominic Cavendish of *The Telegraph* newspaper wrote that the festival marks “10 years of the company’s against-the-odds survival” (Cavendish). Despite the enthusiasm of his statement, this chapter departs from Cavendish’s celebratory remark to consider “survival” as a mode of historical production specific to the liberal discourse of human rights. More often than not the foreign press has qualified the BFT’s value as a theater collective in terms of its survival under precarious conditions in Belarus. Indeed, it is the BFT’s survival that has been recognized as most important for human rights in the press and scholarly anthologies.²¹ What, then, does it mean to celebrate survival as the basis for a retrospective of artistic work in *Staging A Revolution*? If a modernist, revolutionary notion of historical production requires the gesture of death through which to cut the past off from the present (and future), what history-making relations are established when surviving becomes the gesture of history?

²¹ For example, in a recent anthology on human rights and theater published in 2015 the BFT was featured first in a list of theater companies that risked their lives to make work in a country where “making protest theater can bring about an individual’s disappearance or death” (Luckhurst and Morin 3).

This chapter looks to performance to help make sense of the peculiar temporal paradox that *Staging A Revolution* presents: that the historical occasion for the festival is precisely the BFT's ability to not become history, i.e. its particular ability to survive the fate of disappearance and/or death.

Drawing on Joseph Roach's concept of performance as a process of surrogation that auditions "stand-ins" for original roles, this chapter argues that *Staging A Revolution* is a performance site where the BFT's theater productions about oppositional political struggle in Belarus were surrogated, or substituted, for global issues of social justice and human rights. To substantiate this point, I look at two BFT productions at the festival—*King Lear* and *Time of Women*—to analyze how these productions stage survival in Belarus and how they resonate with the Let's Act! discussions that follow the performances. Taken together and placed within the larger framing of *Staging A Revolution*, I contend that these productions catalyze a mode of survival politics at the heart of liberal discourse on human rights that, to paraphrase historian Samuel Moyn, has become the status-quo project of "moral consensus" in international relations after the end of contestation-based politics in the 1970s (Moyn 49).²² To be more precise, *Staging A Revolution* reveals how this project of moral consensus is not a pre-given characteristic of international relations, but a dynamic performance event where a particular human rights body that does not age replaces political aging. I refer to this performance of substitution as an "anti-aging" effect.

²² The term "moral consensus" is taken from Moyn's essay "The Future of Human Rights" in a collection of writing commissioned in conjunction with an art exhibition called *Newtopia: The State of Human Rights*: 2013. Also see Moyn *The Last Utopia*: 2010 and *Human Rights and the Uses of History*: 2014. I consider his argument in more detail in the introduction of this dissertation.

Survival and Human Rights Surrogacy

“Survival” has come to serve as the main narrative for the BFT since they began work in Minsk in 2005. The refrain of survival is echoed in the ways that scholars, journalists and theater professionals describe the company’s value. Theater columnist Randy Gener makes this argument about the BFT in *American Theater Magazine* in 2009: “at this historical moment, questions about Free Theatre’s aesthetic merits—even if they are not irrelevant—are beside the point. What matters is that in Belarus it exists at all” (Gener). Gener exemplifies the point that what matters most about the BFT is their very survival, rather than the content in their productions. Elsewhere, in Minsk, my interlocutors who support the company often make a similar point. Tania Arcimovič, an independent theater director and critic working in Minsk, tells me that the reason she supports the BFT has less to do with the work itself and more to do with the way that the company has been squeezed out of the Belarusian cultural sphere and rarely invited to perform in the main theater forums in the country. She mentions she will critique the company’s artistic methods only after the playing field evens out between the company and the state system of theater production. Her qualification of the company’s importance has to do with the way the BFT pressures the organs of production in the country and continues to function within these conditions. What is most valuable about the BFT is that they continue to, well, exist.

Although not explicitly stated, the rhetoric of survival is also used to describe the BFT in scholarly literature on human rights and performance. For example, in the anthology *Theater and Human Rights after 1945*, the BFT is featured first in a list of theater companies who risk their life to make their work in a country where “making

protest theater can bring about an individual's 'disappearance' or death" (Luckhurst and Morin 3). The history written about the company in human rights literature highlights the conditions of its survival and fragile future. Even though the BFT is engaged in a political struggle in Belarus, what makes the company "human rights" is its ability to survive, rather than any political meaning inscribed in its work.

Importantly, since members of the company received political asylum in 2011, the narrative of survival has extended to the BFT's work in their second home of the UK. Theater critic Carol Rocomora, writing in *American Theater Magazine* in 2015, notes that "the tireless Belarus Free Theatre, in short, is more than a theatrical marvel. It is, arguably, a theatre of firsts: the first contemporary company to survive, function and flourish both in exile and at home, despite repression" (Rocomora). In both Belarus and the UK, the company's relevance has to do with its ability to survive as a theater under various financial, legal and socio-political restraints. Even though the conditions of surviving vary drastically considering the two different histories of oppression in the UK and Belarus, survival is extrapolated through the bodies of the BFT as a value across these two spaces. The company's bi-national existence did not diminish its status as a human rights theater, but potentially doubled its value since it can claim survival in Belarus (as a political theater that is not allowed official registration) as well as in the UK (as a refugee theater struggling financially).

Survival was extrapolated from the bodies of the BFT as a highly flexible concept that transcends the particulars of socio-political location. It is valuable universally because it registers a pressure to mainstream and/or state-based modes of production. In this way, survival is historical to the extent that it exists outside of institutionalized

politics and produces a *history without history*—a historical relation distinct from integrationist models of history associated with political structures. As an anti-historical value, survival became a modality of performance that flattens out historical differences by connecting spaces through a general pressure against domination, rather than through encounters with the distinct historical political milieus in the UK, US and Belarus. The BFT's fringe status was elevated to a universalizing value of survival that connected the territories through which they traveled while simultaneously occluding the disenfranchised bodies that struggle to survive *within* the domestic, colonial histories of this globally connected space.²³ This process of surrogation was the human rights performative of survival.

The BFT's human rights performative of survival is critical to understanding *Staging A Revolution*, since, as Cavendish of *The Telegraph* reminds us, the historical marker of the festival is the celebration of this against-all-odds survival. This amounts to a commemoration of the BFT's 10-year history of existence without history, which the festival celebrated in a rather unique way.

Although grounded in the presentation of ten BFT works,²⁴ the scale and reach of *Staging A Revolution* extended beyond these theater productions. Every evening, the festival included a minimum of three hours of activities for audience members. There was

²³ In the context of the UK, survival as a general concept against power structures refracted from racial colonial history, in the US the history of slavery and, equally, in Belarus forms of ethnic violence against Jews.

²⁴ The productions included plays the BFT created in Minsk from 2006-2008 such as *Generation Jeans* (2006), *Being Harold Pinter* (2006), *Zone of Silence* (2008) and *Discover Love* (2008), as well as productions they created in London after the three co-directors of the company—Natalia Koliada, Nikolai Khalezin and Vladimir Scherban—received refugee status in the UK in 2011. These post-2011 productions include *Minsk 2011: A Reply to Kathy Acker* (2012), *Trash Cuisine* (2013), *King Lear* (2013) and the *Price of Money* (2014). The festival also featured the world premiere of the BFT's newest production, *Time of Women* (2015) that was first shown a few months earlier in Minsk. The festival began with an early BFT production from 2005 of Sarah Kane's play *Psychosis 4:48*.

a 10-minute pre-show presentation, where Natalia Koliada, the artistic director and English “voice” of the company, promoted souvenirs from the festival: a tote bag, a book on freedom, and t-shirts, all with the signature festival design of a phallic-looking metal-sculpted hand with an erect middle finger sticking out.²⁵ She also announced that the wooden benches the audience sat on were intended to recreate the atmosphere of watching their theater in Minsk, and joked that they probably would cram more people into the seats in Minsk but the safety regulations in the UK were infringing on their freedom. After each performance, two platters of smoked fish on rye bread were brought out as a “Belarusian snack” for audience members and there was a short break. Following the break there were panel discussions, called Let’s Act!, where global social justice and human rights issues were discussed. These discussions were in partnership with UK organizations. For example, after *Time of Women* there was a discussion on “Media Freedom in Belarus and The UK” co-presented with the Rory Peck Trust, an organization that advocates for the safety of journalists. After Let’s Act!, a presentation was given to the audience about an issue of social justice that required attention. The night I saw *Time of Women* the audience was urged to join in a solidarity campaign currently underway in Dublin, Ireland in support of woman working in theater.²⁶

Staging A Revolution not only commemorated the BFT’s survival, but survival was the procedure at the festival that allowed for mostly Belarus-centric plays to be re-framed through the Let’s Act! discussions to promote far-reaching issues of human rights

²⁵ I include three Figures at the end of the chapter. The logo for *Staging A Revolution* references the never completed revolutionary project of Vladimir Tatlin’s tower in the early years of Soviet history. The tower of revolutionary future is also commemorated in a 2000 stamp in Russia.

²⁶ The audience was given information about a petition to sign and encouraged to take a group photo that spelled out “In Solidarity With Irish Women.”

that spanned multiple geographical locations. Survival organized in one place, on one stage, multiple social justice issues from around the world through a performance that can best be understood as surrogation, a concept offered by performance scholar Joseph Roach.

In his 1996 book *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Roach writes that, “the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual and perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitute the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure...survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates” (2). For Roach, surrogacy is a dynamic process of social continuity and historical transmission carried out across the dead/alive divide, when survivors audition as stand-ins for the roles of the dead. As performance, this process happens through the embodied transfer of gesture, language, and other sensible material. Roach’s concept prompts the consideration of public performances such as theater festivals not as objects that contain historical knowledge, but as historical modes of transmitting knowledge. This transmission troubles a modernist construction of history that conceptualizes clean breaks between past, present and future. Instead, surrogation is the embodied and aesthetically available process of memory. Roach calls this a “doomed search for originals” that is a “voyage not of discovery but of erasure” because surrogation will always imply an imperfect fit between the bodies of the dead and the survivors that replace them (6). This notion of surrogacy provides an entry point for understanding the substitutions in the “network of relations” enacted at *Staging A Revolution* between the BFT productions and the Let’s Act! discussions as a variety of

social justice issues came to stand in as an “imperfect fit” for the original concerns in BFT productions.

Roach’s surrogation happens on the basis of the fragility of the body in the event of death. “Death” is two-fold: a physical, material reality for the body and also a symbolic and cultural construction of the body. Even as death marks the physical body’s fragility, Roach writes that the role and function of death in societies is deeply tied to cultural constructions that make use of the dead for specific, highly political purposes. He makes the legal and social ramifications of the two-fold notion of death evident through a description of the paradox of the “King’s two bodies” in French and English 17th and 18th century history. At this time, royal burials of kings materialized a spectacular staging that displayed the rotting corpse of the king’s *natural body* in order to secure the indestructibility of the king’s sovereign body, his *body politic*. The performance linked the two bodies together in a process of historical surrogacy which provided that, even if the King’s natural body dies, his political body lives on—a construction of the body that was captured in the performative phrase “The King is Dead – Long Live the King.” This surrogacy also sustained legal arguments that allowed Tudor lawyers to argue for the immutability and agelessness of a young Edward VI in order to claim for him property during his minority from Queen Elizabeth (38). They argued that while the natural body was “subject to the imbecilities of age” his political body was adult and immortal. Thus, the natural body’s instability in relation to age was cause for the construction of the legal fiction of a stable, whole, and immutable body politic that could reproduce governmental power not only in the event of death, but in the event of other forms of bodily disintegration such as the imbecility of young age.

Whereas in Roach's example the fragile *natural* body of the King was substituted for an ageless and immortal *political* body in order to secure legal assets and power, my hypothesis is that substitutions at *Staging A Revolution* happen based on a different form of material fragility—the surviving body. Survival's all-encompassing spatial flexibility has to do with the temporal state of age constructed for the surviving body: a state of existence on the precipice of death, but not dead. It is a baseline existence that is both about a natural body (i.e. the very physical condition of bodily surviving where all energies are directed toward remaining alive) and also about a political body (i.e. the condition of being caught at the breaking point of a specific socio-political system, such as the BFT's unofficial position as a theater company within the system of theatrical production in Belarus). While the ageless body of the King re-centers political power, the construction of the surviving body as ageless is based on a denial of the comfort of integration into a system that offers security of legal status, financial resources and/or physical safety. The timeliness of survival refers to a perceived interplay between the place of production and the company being out of place. The BFT is timely precisely because it is not *of* the time whereby time is thought of with a capital T as that of proper production.

Staging A Revolution should be regarded as a form of historical transmission that occurs on the basis of a surviving body that is temporally *in* history (it exists) to the extent that it is not *of* history (lacking access to the mechanism of integration). To investigate this mode of historical transmission, I divide the rest of the chapter into sections that examine: (a) how spectacle produces a form of bodily anti-aging in *King Lear* for the purpose of sustaining sovereign power (b) how the festival itself surrogates,

or substitutes, political anti-aging for a far more inclusive and flexible notion of human anti-aging, which constructs the survival body (c) the conditions that necessitate the production of a surviving body, and lastly, (d) an analysis of what the gestures of survival between the BFT and UK audiences accomplish at the festival, and for whom.

***King Lear* and The Spectacle of Anti-Aging**

The “Belarusian” *King Lear* was the second to last play presented at *Staging A Revolution*. It was developed for, and premiered at, the Globe to Globe Shakespeare festival in 2012, the year the city of London hosted the Olympic Games.²⁷ Unlike the other BFT productions at the festival, *King Lear* was not the kind of documentary-based devised theater work²⁸ typically associated with the BFT. It was an adaptation of the classic Shakespearean text which—like all the other nation-based interpretations of Shakespeare at the Globe-to-Globe festival—refurbished the script for a contemporary Belarusian context.

In the first scene of *King Lear*, the stage is set for a performance at Lear’s court. Two long benches are set-up onstage, and actors who play members of the court enter to take their places. The court fool takes his place at the piano and Kent takes up an

²⁷ The BFT was invited by the Globe to Globe festival committee to represent Belarus with a staging of a “Belarusian Shakespeare.” Vladimir Scherban, the director of *King Lear*, introduces the production to the audience at *Staging A Revolution* with a translator. Scherban mentions that the Belarusian Ministry of Culture attempted to cancel the premiere in 2012 because they found it inappropriate that the BFT—rather than an official national theater—would represent the nation in conjunction with the Olympic Games. With the exception of *Being Harold Pinter*, this production received the most critical praise of any BFT work, although it was not in the prototypical style that made the company famous

²⁸ There are two directors that stage BFT productions, Nikolai Khalezin and Vladimir Scherban. Scherban, the director of *King Lear*, described to me in a 2013 interview that his signature style is an eclectic approach to documentary theater that incorporates (a) verbatim-style techniques brought to Belarus vis-à-vis the Russian acquisition of such techniques from the UK Court Theater, (b) physical-based and object-based theater inspired by the work of Russian director Anatoly Vasiliev, and (c) Vladimir’s own investment in Belarusian traditional folk dance and singing.

accordion. The court members seem to prepare for a performance by warming-up their voices, practicing scales and doing vocal exercises. They take their seats. From the back-left corner a very slow -moving body, hunched over in a black outfit with white hair completely covering his face, moves toward the center of the stage. The body rolls a blue box on steel wheels, which resembles both a baby carriage and a treasure chest. Everyone in the court is quiet. When the slow-moving body reaches a position in the center, he quickly throws off his gray hair—revealing it to be a wig—and laughs in a maniacal and self-satisfied fashion at his theater trick: he had entered as an old man, slow and with white hair, and then cast the physical performance and his wig aside to reveal himself as a much younger man. This is Lear. The court members catch the drift of his prompt of laughter and also laugh and applaud the King for his “great” performance.

Next, Lear opens up the trunk/ carriage he rolled onstage, sits down on a stool, and awaits performances from his court. The reason for the court members’ vocal warm-ups, and their indulgence of the King’s joke, becomes clearer as one-by-one each of Lear’s three daughters gets up from the bench onstage to perform a song and dance number for the King. Each is dressed in traditional Belarusian garb. After their respective performances, they approach the king and get down on their knees. Lear reaches into his trunk/carriage, scoops up a few large handfuls of dirt, and places the dirt into the daughters’ aprons. The women roll the dirt up in their aprons and return to the benches onstage. The effect is striking: the daughters have been impregnated by dirt. The “seed” of power represented in the handfuls of dirt delivered between father and daughters forms an incestuous ritual of inheritance that links together the distribution of wealth and property with sexual reproduction.

Writing about this scene after seeing the production as part of the Globe-to-Globe Festival, theater scholar Keren Zaiontz connects the court's applause and the performances of the daughters to contemporary Belarusian politics and the autocratic regime of 20+-year rule of president Alexander Lukashenko. She writes that "the contest for the king's affection references those dictatorial regimes where citizens perform their fidelity to a megalomaniacal leader through demonstrations of mass weeping or applause. The daughters' performances are no different; their bodies labour to prop up their father's greatness" (201). In this opening scene "spectacle is revealed to be what binds court and family" (201). In this interpretation of *King Lear*, the spectacular nature of this politics of affection—highlighted in the applause of Lear's performance and the overdone sexualized song and dance numbers of the daughters—is presented as both manipulative and misogynistic.

The BFT's *King Lear* intersects with Roach's example of surrogation premised on the "King's two bodies" in a provocative way. Similar to how King Edward VI's all-too-young body was produced as an ageless legal fiction, the first scene of *King Lear* depicts how the function of spectacle at the court reproduces the fiction of an ageless Lear despite the imbecility of his old age. Instead of the theatricality of the rotting dead body of the King displayed for the public in 17th century England and France, the BFT's depiction underscores that this production of age happens through *performing* bodies that wear appropriate costume pieces and sing and dance. Even if the natural body of Lear ages, performance sustains and transfers the power of the king in an act that makes him not so much young again as perpetually ageless. In this light, Lear throwing off his wig takes on added meaning that requires more attention. The theater trick of Lear at the

beginning of the scene begs the question: is it possible that spectacle is also a prop that reverses the effects of aging by making an old man appear young again? When Lear throws off his wig of white hair, might the spectacle of singing and dancing numbers enact a process of reproduction that keeps the King young?

The game of doubles—old Lear, young Lear—is not merely a theatrical prop (or a wig, for that matter) that glosses over the truth, but a process through which power is reproduced and transferred through the body. Press materials for BFT’s *King Lear* typically described the play as “Shakespeare’s great play about speaking the truth”.²⁹ They prompted a reading of the BFT’s first scene as a critique of the way that theatrical tricks prop up the King’s power at the cost of truth. In autocratic systems, as with kingdoms, spectacle proves to be a performance for sustaining regimes of incestuous inheritance, a good “prop” in theater terms, precisely because it creates a mask of false consciousness. However, my analysis differs from this perspective. Instead of seeing spectacle as a “trick” of false consciousness, I am highlighting the productive work of spectacle as it creates a specific bodily construction through which legal and political structures are activated. The daughters’ performing bodies in *King Lear* provide the tools that sustain the legal and political fiction of an ageless King so that they can claim their inheritance. Spectacle is an embodied strategy for anti-aging.

The *King Lear* scene corresponds to another “real world” scene that many Belarusians would be familiar with: president Alexander Lukashenko standing at a podium before an official event, dressed in a military outfit. Next to him, a young blonde boy about ten years old, his son, dressed in an identical military outfit to his father with

²⁹ See *Staging A Revolution* brochure.

the exception of a little triangle hat. A few weeks prior to *Staging A Revolution* there was an inauguration of Lukashenko's renewed office term in Minsk. An acquaintance of mine was asked to attend as a representative of the state's music institute. After the inauguration, she explained to me, half-joking, that Lukashenko's son is being groomed for the job of president and will take power after his father is dead. The identical outfits, with the exception of the little hat, propped up a process of surrogation in performance—here an official public event—where the mini-replica of his son was auditioned as a stand-in for the president, hence binding together not the court and family as in *King Lear* but the nation and the family.

The scene of Lukashenko and his son allows us to understand why the BFT's *King Lear* would critique the spectacle of anti-aging. The display of the daughter's sexualized dances makes the point evident: these performances are sexually violent, abusive and misogynistic. Although the female body is forcefully displayed in these performances, the female body is necessary to the extent that it secures the integrated and ageless lineage of the King's body. The first scene in *King Lear* reminds us that reproduction is premised not just on the erasure of the King's bodily fragility (i.e. his aging) to produce a body politic but, more importantly, on the erasure of the female labor that performs and props up these acts of surrogacy. In relation to the public discourses surrounding president Alexander Lukashenko and his son Kolya, the violent nature of this surrogation happens through the erasure of Kolya's mother from the equation. Not only is she not on stage, but very little is presented about her and her background in public discourse. The reproduction of Lukashenko's power through the son's semi-

identical body happens at the expense of the (literally) laboring female body whose role is actively written out of the nation's political history.

The theater tricks and its play of doubles—old Lear, young Lear—is a provocation to question the construction of temporality rooted in bodily age and aging. In the next section, I show how the spectacle of anti-aging—critiqued by the BFT in *King Lear* in relation to national politics—becomes the protocol through which to construct an inclusive and flexible human rights body at *Staging A Revolution*.

Let's Act! The Imperfect Fit Between Political Aging and Human Aging

After a 10-minute break following the performance of *King Lear* at the Young Vic in London, I return to the auditorium to participate in the Let's Act! discussion. It is titled Let's Act!: Mortality and addresses the topic of “the future of old age” sponsored by the Biogerontology Research Foundation. In my festival brochure, I read a pitch for the discussion to come: “Lear raises the most profound questions about age and power. But what would happen to power if humans didn't grow old? How near are we to that future? And, how, until we get there, if indeed we want to, can we manage death better?” Onstage sit two scientists, Andres Sandberg, a transhumanist philosopher associated with the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford and Avi Roy, President of the Biogerontology Research Foundation.

The two panelists introduce their field of age studies with a provocative claim that the world's population is living longer and longer. This raises questions about how to ensure a better quality of life for an increasingly elderly population. As promised by the advertisement pitch, the tone of the discussion drifts between new medical and

technological advances that allow us to age better and maintain physical security (i.e. be youthful, healthy etc.) along with the social discourse of how to deal with the dignity of our aging population. The latter point about the aging population is most connected with *King Lear* as the two researchers draw on the depiction of familial violence in the play to describe scenarios of abuse directed toward the elderly, who are neglected in the network of relations between family members. Aging is revealed to be a problem in society as those members that are old tend to be marginalized and sidelined.

In the audience, a few people, including myself, raise questions about the implications of the research. I raise my hand to ask a question: “what about aging and the issue of inheritance brought up in *King Lear*? How do we think of aging beyond the individual’s decaying body and across generational divides as presented in the play?” Specifically, I bring up the example of the distribution of wealth through inheritance structures in the United States and its social implications. The panelists respond to the question by reminding the audience that aging is linked to power and that the relationship between aging and dictatorial regimes is an important site for research. My question, like others, is addressed and absorbed into the larger discussion about aging and its stakes for humanity.

I ponder the relationship between the production of *King Lear* and the Let’s Act! discussion. *Did the conversation about managing death better evolve from an undisputed position that aging was a problem for all of us? Was this a translation error between the production of King Lear and Let’s Act!?*

Indeed, it did seem as if a translation error occurred between the production and the Lets Act! discussion. In *King Lear* the spectacle of anti-aging kept the aging Lear

alive through a conflict between bodies. It was a critique of a method of managing age by producing an ageless *political* body across generations at the cost of violence toward other bodies (specifically female ones, in reference to Lear's daughters). In Let's Act! the ageless *human* body was generally supported because the prospect of a whole and integrated humanity was undisputed as a positive ideal.³⁰ In medical terms it was indisputable that we all would want a healthy body and medical treatments of anti-aging. In social terms, it was self-evident that we should advocate for elders and repair the injustices in their status in the social hierarchy. Aging was thus a common human problem that everyone in the auditorium could rally around. When questions such as my own were raised about scenarios of fiscal anti-aging in the form of transgenerational inheritance or the anti-aging strategies of dictatorial regimes, these points did not perturb the central premise of the discussion for a collective care for the human dignity of the aging body. In the Let's Act! discussion about aging there seemed to be no visible conflict between bodies.

³⁰ The relation between the body and humanity is discussed by Elizabeth Anker in her book, *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature*. She writes that, "As liberalism scripts the human, the dignified individual in possession of rights is imagined to inhabit an always already fully integrated and inviolable body: a body that is whole, autonomous and self-enclosed. The premise turns corporeal integrity into something of a baseline condition that precedes the ascription of dignity and rights to an individual. At the same time it posits a dangerously purified subject" (4). Anker argues that in liberal political philosophy a mutilated body needs to be restored to wholeness to create the "dual myths" of the integrated individual body and the unified political body. This notion of embodiment, which is actually a "contempt for the body" (4) in discourse, is premised on a notion of a liberal subject that is abstract, integrated and otherwise idealized. It is this abstracted, unified body that then authorizes "the exclusion and domination of those peoples deemed insubordinate, foreign and otherwise infectious." I find her work productive for thinking about the gendered and racialized constructions of the body's age in this chapter in two ways: (a) that an untimely body becomes a way for patriarchy to consign women to subservience in the BFT production *Time of Women* and (b) that an irrational body becomes a racialized discrimination of "bodily excess" that cannot be integrated into the nation. Whereas Anker suggests that the integrated body is what creates exclusion and domination—and therefore we need to think of the body differently to subvert the power of this sort of liberal discourse—my chapter shows how the human rights surviving body promotes a spatial flexibility that seemingly negotiates the discriminating factor of exclusion/inclusion of sovereignty. Of course, this flexibility also promotes its own form of discrimination in the form of not having access to history, a perpetual timelessness.

What first presented itself as a translation error between the BFT productions and Let's Act! discussions cannot properly be described as "error." In terms of performance, error implies that an original role was somehow performed incorrectly, or not fully right, by the substitute body that took on the role. Error is more definitive and oppositional than the "imperfect fit" that Roach describes when he suggests that surrogacy produces historical continuity between dead bodies and survivors who take on the roles of the dead. What was striking at the Let's Act! discussion was that conflicts between bodies could have emerged as members of the audience raised issues about fiscal and dictatorial forms of anti-aging. However, this did not happen. Potential conflicts were seamlessly absorbed. Rather than a translation error, the topic of human aging, when unhinged from the "Belarusian political context," looked like an elastic and flexible production: it collated a wide range of topics (from medical and familial issues to more discriminating economic and political issues) together on one stage that neither canceled each other out nor contested each another.

Let's Act! was not an error or misunderstanding as much as a productive possibility: it was a particular surrogacy that abstracted the topic of aging in the BFT's *King Lear* to the level of the collective human body that lacked human dignity. This abstraction could easily digest conflict because it spoke to all humans and did not force questions of disagreement. The appeal of the topic of human aging was that it created a seemingly inclusive and flexible issue that could encompass and absorb all topics, even those that could be disputed. In Let's Act!, the surrogation at work replaced a fragile body for a construction of the human body that did not require a debate about aging. This surrogation was a tension between the anti-aging surrogacy depicted in *King Lear* and

Let's Act!. The construction of age in *King Lear* prompted an engagement with political aging by forcing recognition of both historical continuity and discontinuity and its stakes for sovereignty. In *King Lear*, what changes and what remains the same is the fundamental conflict of aging that constructs time through the body. For the BFT, this is significant as they are fighting for political inclusion through their theater, and their production of *King Lear* argues against a political anti-aging through the body that sustains structures of power that exclude other bodies. Let's Act! abstracted the human body from this historical tension of politics by seamlessly incorporating all political tensions toward the collective imaginary of human dignity.

This brings into focus a critical point about the human rights performative of survival discussed in the previous section. This surviving body of human rights is a fragile body that exists outside of institutionalized structures of power—a *history without history*. When abstracted from the historical process of politics, this body anticipates being restored not to *history*, but to *humanity*. The procedure of human rights anti-aging is able to absorb multiple global issues of human rights, but because the destination of humanity holds no political weight it obscures the history of oppression. A history of oppression would require engaging with the tension of aging—the inclusion/exclusion dynamic of politics—as the BFT does in *King Lear*. The performance of survival incorporates all forms of political fragility and reroutes them toward an ahistorical, ethical destination. This procedure of anti-aging anticipates a healthy restoration of an oppressed group within a political structure, but keeps it perpetually out of reach by never making available a historical destination. The human rights performative of survival not only creates a body that exists on the precipice of extinction, but produces this precipice

over and over again through abstraction and expansion. As a colonial form of expansion the human rights performative does not work through impositions of culture, land grabs or flat-out extermination of bodies. Its colonizing logic works through a therapeutic operation: it pays special attention to the oppressed and cares for these bodies, all the while limiting their access to any real forms of health. In this process of surrogation, the body does not die, but is kept alive.

Dis“orient”alism at the End of Politics

Following the BFT’s production of *Time of Women*, a Let’s Act! discussion was organized on the topic of “Women in Media” that specifically addressed the question of “media freedom in Belarus and the UK.” It was moderated by a female news anchor, Shereen Nanjiani, and featured three female journalists: Irina Khalip (a Belarusian journalist whose story was the basis of the production *Time of Woman*) and two women from the UK (one with Saudi-British roots who covered news from Saudi Arabia and the other an female editor for a British newspaper). As was the case with the post-*King Lear* discussion, the topic of media freedom was unhinged from the particular and singular context of Belarus. In this discussion, the issue was treated in comparative terms, highlighting differences and similarities between the contexts of Belarus, Saudi Arabia and the UK.

Time of Women was the most recent production from the BFT. It premiered in Minsk in 2014 and had its world premiere in London as part of the *Staging A Revolution* festival. It was directed by BFT co-artistic director Nikolai Khalezin and, unlike *King Lear*, was assembled in documentary theater style based on the real story of three women

activists who participated in the 2010 protests following the election of Alexander Lukashenko. These three women—including Irina Khalip—were jailed for months in a Belarusian prison and lived in one cell together.³¹ *Time of Women* examines womanhood as both a site for resistance and also a form of segregation that serves to distinguish the way that women can and cannot participate in political action. By putting the story of women in the Belarusian opposition at the center of the conversation, the play accomplishes an important intervention in public political discourse that heavily privileges the contributions of men in political struggle. It presents a parallel story—a “time of women”—that disrupts the totality of political time constructed in a patriarchal manner. It also critiques a political system that naturalizes the biological differences between men’s and women’s bodies in order to issue a threat against the opposition. This is provocatively displayed in a scene in the play where the warden of the prison tells the single woman of the three, Natalya, that if she does not sign a document that delegitimizes her position against the government she will be forced to stay in prison for so long that there will no longer be enough time left for her to give birth. In this scene, the timely method of reproduction is revealed to be the mechanism that discriminates and marginalizes women. The fragility of the natural (female) body becomes the site through which to construct a “biological clock” that generates a threat to female participation in

³¹ *Time of Women* goes back and forth between scenes that depict the lived material reality of the cell, the women’s interrogation at the hands of a male prison warden, and scenes of the three women decorating a New Year’s tree in a Minsk apartment after their imprisonment. The last type of scene—at the New Year’s tree—is highly reflective and the actresses are not involved in a task or action together but engage in self-meditation monologues about the past. In the cell scenes, which the audience sees in double through a video recording of the women from an angle reminiscent of a surveillance camera and also behind a scrim where the actresses perform the everyday repertoire of living in a cell—i.e. their morning routine of getting up, brushing their teeth and going to the bathroom in a metal bucket while singing songs in order to drown out the sound. In the interrogation scenes with the male warden we watch the warden demonstrate to the women that prison will “kill the woman” in them. Because of this, many of the tactics these woman display in resistance under these conditions is to make sure that they still look and act like women.

political action by rendering women untimely: they are not fit for the opposition because their bodies are out of sync with the temporality of political punishment. The warden/government is critiqued in the production for constructing aging bodies out of women for the purposes of fostering political stability.

Time of Women poses questions about the construction of aging bodies that are both similar and different from those posed in *King Lear*. In *King Lear* the ageless body propped up power while the aging bodies of women activists in *Time of Women* are rendered untimely by state power. Both BFT productions are concerned with how the state constitutes the timeliness of bodies by securing positions of immortality for some and insubordination for others.

The Let's Act! discussion following *Time of Women* was less "scientific" than the one following *King Lear*, and was directly linked to political struggles and their representation in distinct contexts of Belarus, Saudi Arabia and the UK. Questions from the audience members at the Young Vic gave way to a lively discussion on the subject of how to represent freedom in countries elsewhere, i.e. not at the "home" of the UK. Specifically, two questions from audience members in the Q&A registered a crisis in the representation of foreign political struggles.

The first was from a man sitting with a notepad in the front row. He asked Irina Khalip, the Belarusian journalist who is also a character in *Time of Women*, how to best define freedom and if, perhaps, liberal definitions of freedom that address state-enforced abuses of media censorship and imprisonment in Belarus do not adequately account for the problems of global capitalism. His question claimed a position that disputed the Cold War rhetoric of freedom and the way that it constructs a framework of liberal

development that covers up economic disparities. He implies the following question: Who is to say which one is worse, state repression of media or disenfranchisement at the hands of global capital? He ended his question with an anxious qualification: “perhaps this question is coming from my position in the UK.”³² His qualification implied that he recognized that it might be unfair to evoke the violence of capitalism and question liberal forms of freedom since he does not live under the conditions of state violence in Belarus and is a self-recognized member of another place, the UK. Hence, he worried that his position from the outside might corrupt his perspective on the matter of freedom in Belarus.

Another question from the audience registered a similar anxiety. This question came from an older lady in a wheelchair who describes herself as an artist who in her lifetime had been acquainted with “many artists from East Europe”. She directed a question to Khalip: does everyone in Belarus desire the type of freedom that Khalip advocates, or is it an elitist concern? She adds that her experience has led her to question whether what is imagined as the proper course of political action in the East is actually desired by the average person in the country. Although far more assured of her position than the young man with the notepad, her comment likewise expressed a concern for the limits of her own position as a British citizen. She seemed to want to hear more sides of the story and evoked the idea of the “average person” to suggest that Khalip’s political motivations might only represent a fraction of the Belarusian population.

These two reconstructed questions from my fieldwork are not outliers in the discussion about Belarusian politics that frequently accompanies BFT productions in the

³² In this section, the quotes included are reconstructs from my fieldnotes while attending the post-show discussions.

UK. In my research attending their shows and post-show discussions since 2011, I often heard questions raised about the proper role that UK audiences should take in advocating for political regime change in Belarus. These questions voiced anxiety about UK intervention in relationship to a political struggle “over there.”

These self-reflexive gestures from the audience seemed admirable to me (or at least critical) until I heard the Saudi-British journalist on the panel respond. She objected to both the question of the older woman and the young man with the notepad and considers them “orientalist.” My attention was piqued. Orientalism is a critical discourse first introduced by Edward Said in the 1970s and developed by others to refer to the depiction of the East by Western writers, specifically the geopolitical entity described as the “Orient” which includes the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Orientalism has figured prominently in colonial and postcolonial literary studies in the US and the UK in geographical areas defined as the Orient, but has had much less traction in describing the relationship between Western and Eastern Europe because Cold War rhetoric typically dominates the production of difference. Although there is reason to be wary of the Saudi-British journalist’s evocation of Orientalism in relation to Belarus,³³ I listened attentively to hear how she translates her qualification of “orientalism” for Belarus and UK audiences. She announced to the audience that the two questions infantilize people in

³³ Scholars such as Melani McAllister in her book *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East 1945-2000* warns that Orientalism has become “too flexible for its own good” when used to describe every form of stereotyping of the Eastern half of the world. She writes that stereotypes might be racist, imperialist and exoticizing “without engaging in the particular logics of Orientalism: binary, feminizing, and citational” (12). It is thus possible to question the Saudi-British journalist’s usage of this term as an inclination to transfer her own expertise in the Middle East to a reading of Belarus. For example, I question her evocation of Orientalism in relation to Belarus since typical qualifiers for Orientalism such as exotic, mysterious and irrational are specifically grounded in a history of the West’s encounter with Islam. Although in some ways these are applicable to representations of Belarus, Belarusian history has made Cold War and post-Cold War constructions of difference far less related to the mystic and mythical and far more based on secular political-economic institutions.

places like Saudi Arabia and Belarus by suggesting that the *time is not right for democratic change* in these countries. In particular she accused the older woman of insinuating that somehow Belarusian citizens might want something different than UK citizens because they are “not ready” for democracy. It is “as if you are suggesting that not everyone would want basic human needs and freedoms,” she added.

The Saudi-British journalist’s critique of Orientalism is both familiar and also distinctly novel at *Staging A Revolution*. Usually an orientalist description is one whereby Western writers characterize Eastern forms as uncivilized and undeveloped compared to their Western counterparts. A logic of time underpins binary classifications that recognize the cultural forms in the West as mature and modern, and those in the East as immature and traditional. Thus, the peoples of the Orient exhibit a quality of being too young and untimely in relationship to European grown-ups. Writing about the gendered temporal construction of Orientalism in Said’s work, Melani McAlister writes that “the Oriental is ‘feminized,’ thus constructed as mysterious, infinitely sexual and tied to the body, irrational and inclined toward despotism; the European is ‘masculinized’ and posited as civilized, restrained, rational and capable of democratic self-rule” (9). The Saudi-British journalist sees this representational strategy at work in the post-show discussion when she criticizes the audience for suggesting that the “time is not right” for political change for Belarusians. Her critique of orientalism reminds the audience that the distinction between UK audiences and average Belarusians is not a wholesale difference of kind that makes it possible for UK audiences to imagine that Belarusians are a different type of human. This journalist asks that Belarusians be recognized as having the same basic human needs. Indeed, as McAlister reminds us, Said’s own writing saw humanism as the solution and

alternative to the problems of difference between the East and the West created by Orientalism (see McAlister, 10).

Orientalism, as a process of creating temporal difference between the West and the East, is often accompanied with a complementary critique of a colonial process known as “imperialism” or, at times, the “civilizing mission.”³⁴ The civilizing mission is premised on actions that attempt to remedy the temporal difference between the East and the West by helping the East “grow up”, i.e. develop the socio-political and civil institutions that would bring Others up to speed with those in the civilized world. As multiple scholars have demonstrated, the seemingly benign rhetoric of the civilizing mission legitimized multiple forms of economic and political violence across the colonized world.

It is here that we see both the UK audience’s two questions and the Saudi-British journalist’s response depart from critiques that suture together Orientalism (as difference) and the civilizing mission (as remedy of difference). Whereas one might expect that those UK audience members that construct “Orientalist” perceptions of Belarusian immaturity would want to remedy this situation through a civilizing mission, the two questions from the audience reveal a hesitation and uncertainty around the role of intervention. They are self-reflexive of the problems of the civilizing mission—i.e. we no longer assume that our civility is the right type of civility for Others and, in fact, we question if it is even worse for others (hence the problems of capitalism brought up by the man with the

³⁴ “Civilizing mission” tends to be evoked far more in colonial contexts in Africa and Asia, whereas “imperialism” is evoked for the less formally colonial relation in the Middle East where economic, political and military interventions took place under different historical conditions. I find “civilizing mission” a helpful term in this section because “civilization” and the “civilized world” are at stake in these discussions of liberal democracy in Belarus, and are terms I often encountered in my research there (although I recognize they are being used in distinctly different ways than in colonial studies).

notepad). This pulling apart of the civilizing mission from Orientalism as a representation of differences at this post-show discussion markedly departs from critiques where the call for intervention is considered Orientalist when premised on a notion that the East needs to be reformed of their immature ways. In the Saudi-British journalist's response at *Staging A Revolution*, the opposite is true: what is Orientalist is the *trepidation* around intervention premised on the idea that Belarusians might either not want democratic change or might need to more fully consider the costs of change in relation to the viciousness of capitalism.

Orientalism is deeply tied to constructions of temporality in relation to aging. Civilizing the Other is always tied to the process of proper aging, and, as a cultural formation of age, Saidian Orientalism establishes a binary temporal difference between mature/immature peoples along with a strategy for intervention constructed as a spectrum for growth. To wave the critique of orientalism in association with the political struggle in Belarus, the Saudi-British journalist should be insisting that the two UK questioners are establishing a process of aging constructed in unilateral, progressive and developmental way from autocratic regime in Belarus (i.e. immature) to their aging into a liberal democracy (i.e. mature). Yet this is not the case. At *Staging A Revolution*, Orientalism became a critique of difference created not through the unilateral and developmental growth of "untimely" Belarusians but, on the contrary, in the condition of incomprehensibility of the West toward the East. *What is better for Belarus: liberal reforms or capitalist violence? How can one gauge what the "average" Belarusian wants?* What is deemed orientalism at *Staging A Revolution* is not a construction of the speed of aging (i.e. the Belarusians will eventually move toward liberal democratic

change in their own time). It can be more properly described as a construction of space that registers a loss of direction. As a condition of incomprehensibility rather than assuredness it does not recognize aging in progressive and developmental terms toward democratic change precisely because it cannot pinpoint a right or wrong direction. Therefore, I argue that what is registered at *Staging A Revolution* is a form of dis-“orient”alism, which is, an inability for UK audiences to sustain a temporal orientation between themselves and Belarusians. It registers a crisis in the liberal identity of UK audiences.

Dis-“orient”alism finds an ideal partner in the temporal relation of survival, that salient point that allows the BFT’s work to be received as human rights. The questions from UK audience members are arguably reflective of their own lack of knowledge about a political situation elsewhere and worry about the dangers of imposing an Orientalist form of liberal democratic development. Likewise, the Saudi-British journalist’s critique that these same audience members are disoriented from the “basic human needs” of Belarusians does not suggest a proper course of non-Orientalist action. Her comment reinforces an ethical consideration that Belarusians have the same basic human needs as all other humans. Taken together, it is possible to see that dis-orientalism is able to consider the humanity of Others *and also* does not need to consider a proper course of intervention into a political struggle elsewhere. The Let’s Act! discussion mobilized dis-orientalism not to highlight a conflict of positions in terms of democratic change as much as to promote and reinforce the idea that “basic human needs” unites people across the world despite the fact that a program of action seemed impossible to comprehend. Belarusians might not necessarily be *too* young for freedom as an expression of alterity,

but it is impossible for liberal audiences to suggest and support a particular vision of freedom because they are anxious about getting it wrong.

In this light, it becomes possible to understand why survival is celebrated at *Staging A Revolution*. Survival is a concept worthy of support within liberal festivities because it is commensurate with “our” humanity instead of our different political missions. Survival does not need to account for aging as it registers a condition of being suspended outside of history and is powerful for honoring the “basic human needs” of others without engaging in the question of aging that requires a construction of progress and development to register ages of being “too young” or otherwise immature. The surviving human body’s aging process is constructed in spatial, rather than progressive, temporal terms so as to navigate the anxiety that gave rise to its formation, i.e. the condition of dis-orientalism. The anti-aging effect at the festival produced the surviving body as a flexible and elastic spatial category that could circumvent the dangers of political opposition and the rights/wrongs of an orientation-driven relation to political struggles. As survivors, the BFT and Belarusians escape the problem of aging altogether. Survivors are the perfect bodies for dis-orientalism because they are abstracted and suspended from their political histories and made valuable as human beings. Not only can the basic human needs of survivors be advocated and cared for, but also these actions need never encounter conflicts or opposition, and can thus absorb any and all survivors around the world.

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama wrote an essay that argued that the “end of history” had arrived in the triumph of the economic and political ideals of liberalism. The end of history was the end of viable alternatives in political thought to liberalism and the

creation of a common ideological heritage of mankind. For Fukuyama this triumph of liberalism did not mean that all international relations would cease to exist when all places in the world would sync-up to one another in a post-historical utopia. Instead, he suggests that the world would become divided into parts that are post-historical and parts that are historical—which amounts, for him, to a post-historical world where large states (in predominantly Europe) that no longer compete with themselves for alternative political positions, and to a historical world where smaller states and non-European regions would work through ethnic and national tensions. Although history would continue, the salient point of his essay is that the international relations in a post-historical world would be abstracted toward the goal of humanity that would replace worldwide ideological struggle with economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands (Fukuyama). He concludes, “In the post historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual care taking of the museum of human history” (Fukuyama).

In regard to *Staging A Revolution*, it would seem that Fukuyama is right to identify a post-historical moment where the loss of revolutionary conflicts on a mass scale has led to a “perpetual care taking of the museum of human history.” *Staging A Revolution* was performance at the end of history whereby survival became the procedure through which to memorialize, celebrate and all together commemorate human history without having to dispute political ends. However, in distinction to Fukuyama, the festival also reveals that the post-historical moment was not a comfortable partition between historical and post-historical international spaces. It was a performance

conducted in a heightened state of anxiety that calculated human needs and desires because of a condition of dis-orientalism—a loss of direction that registers the inability to speak about political history. It required care for the bodies in history, such as the BFT, in order to maintain and sustain a global consciousness of liberalism’s victory.

The next section looks at the relations secured in the performance of care between the surviving human body and UK audiences. I draw attention to a gestural performance of survival and what it accomplishes at *Staging A Revolution*.

The Aging Theater and Liberal Gestures of Global Connectivity

At the beginning of every production at *Staging A Revolution*, one of the BFT members, usually Natalia Koliada, conducts a poll with hands in the audience. She asks: “who has already seen a BFT show during the festival?” Every night hands go up and the hands are taken as a case and point that the BFT continues to attract audiences, and that these audiences are committed to the BFT’s theater (i.e. they showed up multiple times).

Gestures of support from audience members at the festival present themselves in other ways as well. Theater critic Dominic Cavendish, in his review of the event, highlights the way that “simple gestures” such as the waving of hands between audiences in Minsk and in London are a site through which solidarity and global connectivity arises. He writes:

“Perhaps the most moving moment at the opening performance of the mini-festival (Staging a Revolution) came when co-founder Natalia Kaliada tilted a laptop at the audience huddled on benches in a dank brick-walled basement in Clerkenwell. On the screen, we could see a group of BFT supporters watching the

event back home thanks to a live-stream. We waved. They waved back. From such simple gestures of solidarity and empathy, perhaps, democratic revolutions can be born” (Cavendish, *The Telegraph*, 3.11.2015).

“Simple gestures” of solidarity and empathy such as the raising of hands and the waving back and forth via technologies such as Skype are imperative for understanding the performance of survival activated between the BFT and UK audiences. In Zaiontz’s article about *King Lear* during the Globe to Globe Shakespeare festival, she suggests that the BFT’s “greatest contribution” to the play is the form of connectivity it produces between the audience and a situation elsewhere. She writes: “Relinking *King Lear* to scenarios of abuse that cannot be represented in their place of national origin links the audience to the violations ‘over there’. We are made aware of our globalized link to the other, and it is this nomadic consciousness that constitutes the BFT’s greatest contribution to *King Lear*” (204). Zaiontz’s point resonates with Cavendish, although the “nomadic consciousness” that she writes about arises from the mental effort required of audiences to perceive Shakespeare’s universality in the particular of Belarusian political struggle. In contrast, in *Staging A Revolution* it is not a mental leap in receiving the production of *King Lear* that becomes the focus. In the festival what is established and rehearsed is a physical vocabulary, “simple gestures” and simple actions, of a global consciousness that are staged in the pre-show introductions and Let’s Act! discussions. What do these global gestures of solidarity accomplish for UK audiences?

Answers to this question become evident on the last day of *Staging A Revolution*, Nov. 14th 2015, during the final Let’s Act! of the festival dedicated to the discussion of

the BFT's future and their precarious situation as a theater company in the UK. On two chairs onstage sit Michael Attenborough, former artistic director of the Alamedia theater and part of the well-known Attenborough family of artists, and BFT co-director Natalia Koliada. Attenborough begins to talk about the importance of the Belarus Free Theater as a company *in* the UK. He begins by discussing the morning newspaper and his difficulty getting through the first pages (the ones that presumably featured information about the Paris bombing the night before). He then metaphorically turns the page to an article about how an academic in the UK was not allowed to express his/her views about the transsexual community because it was seen as "politically incorrect." Lastly, he turns the page again to the longer-range issue of Syrian refugees in Europe and expresses concern about xenophobia in Europe and immigration restrictions.

The page-turning through his personal newspaper archive of key issues is telling of what he considers to be important to UK audiences. He ties all three points to the BFT. He notes that the BFT is a refugee theater in the UK and that their situation as a theater company in the UK is financially precarious. Attenborough calls on the support of UK audiences for these artistic refugees because they "pose a test for the UK's liberal character. The marker of a liberal society is not how well it takes care of its own but how well it takes care of its refugees."³⁵

Koliada and Attenborough both ask the audience to support the BFT. Certainly, there are financial needs for the company in the form of donations, but the support called

³⁵ It is evident that the substitution/surrogacy at work to cater to the BFT is also an erasure of difference between Belarusian political struggle and the conditions of refugee vulnerability from the Middle East, which is only heightened by the fact that this particular Let's Act! discussion took place one day after the Paris Attacks. This presented a specific racial and geographical relationship between Britain/Western Europe and Syria and other parts of the Middle East. Although outside the scope of this chapter, more research on the distinction between the Syrian refugee bodies and the refugee theater of the BFT would further develop and nuance the theory of survival as linked to refugees.

for at this Lets Act! has a performance orientation as well: Attenborough and Koliada ask the audience to suggest taboo topics relevant in the UK for the BFT to stage in the future. They collect from the audience issues such as trans-sexual identity and the public school system in the UK. To solidify the point that the BFT will be a valuable asset in the UK theater sphere, Attenborough suggests that they should deal with the taboo issue of “political correctness” that he believes is plaguing the country as a UK variation of a lack of free speech. Attenborough believes that the BFT’s status as refugee artists and activists for free speech in Belarus will allow them to perceive the situation of political correctness effectively because they are not circumscribed by the same demands for political correctness as UK artists.

Although Cavendish in his review mentions that the gestures of support from UK audiences could bring about democratic revolution in Belarus, Attenborough suggests that the real beneficiary is British liberal character. Roach’s concept of surrogacy could serve here as a helpful reminder of how a dynamic of performance *between* cultures might work. Roach argues that surrogation provided a way to define a fictional core by staging contrasts with other bodies of different races, cultures and ethnicities in Circum-Atlantic performance circuits (6). Candidates for surrogation at these racial and cultural margins of society reproduce a center free from the mixtures, blends and provisional antitypes. An excellent example of this process in Roach’s work is the performance of blackface minstrelsy that bolstered the fiction of “whiteness” and in the process erased the black body (and all forms of racial and ethnic mixing) from sight. The search for a community’s origins is accomplished by “auditioning stand-ins” where the opposite of what the community imagines as its core re-centers and makes coherent its identity, a

process carried out in a “climate of heightened anxiety that outsiders will somehow succeed in replacing the original peoples” (6). The gestures of solidarity and empathy at *Staging A Revolution* can therefore be seen as a performance process for re-centering and making coherent a liberal identity for UK audience members as they performed with the BFT and Belarusians in Minsk. As Attenborough suggests, the BFT is valuable as a refugee theater because they provide a testing ground for liberal character at a moment when it is under threat, or in a “climate of heightened anxiety.” For Attenborough this threat is both a climate of political correctness that has eroded a culture of political debate in the UK and likewise the threat of xenophobia and bigotry across Europe in relation to the Syrian refugees. As Western Europe’s tolerance and goodwill is tested by an influx of refugees—and cases of internal xenophobia and violence abound—the BFT provides an opportunity for UK audiences to test and perform liberal character at *Staging A Revolution*.

These points should be considered in relation to the anxiety of dis-orientalism in the previous section. The call on the BFT to address taboo topics in the UK responds to a crisis of correctness – or the inability to determine rights and wrongs. The BFT’s status outside the nation allows UK audiences to reach beyond the limit of liberal character to re-establish their own character. Whereas Roach conceptualizes an opposite in historical terms of the margins of society, the liberal gestures at work in *Staging A Revolution* for the BFT expand the reflexive consideration of the position of UK audiences through an opposite that is located in the zone of survival. This is why the refugee—a suspended, precarious existence without home—is perfectly suited for a project of re-centering liberal character because it is possible to care for their basic human needs and status of

survival without needing to address the historical and political conditions of disenfranchisement. Equally, the surrogation of liberal identity through the bodies of the BFT as refugees provided a safe passage through which to appease anxieties of liberal character because the surviving bodies of the BFT did not register a history of colonial oppression within the UK. The BFT, rather than the actual Syrian refugees caught at the borders of Europe, were the chosen bodies that could appease the problems of xenophobia by reinvesting in liberalism. The BFT propped up a particular ageless body that should now be understood as a continuation and extension of liberal identity and its white, European character.

These gestures of liberal support at *Staging A Revolution* are intended to keep the BFT alive as a refugee theater company as the company comes under the threat of erasure because of financial precarity in the UK. But it is not only financial precarity that is at stake. The anti-aging strategy provides that the company survives in the UK when their reputation as an oppositional political theater is no longer tenable because (a) they are located outside of Belarus and categorized as a refugee theater, but more importantly, because (b) the company's relation to politics in Belarus is *too* timely and endangers their existence as a theater collective. In my research about the BFT over the past few years, I have found that the company is plagued with one specific question: "what happens to your company if Lukashenko is no longer in power?" This question underscores their problem in having been overdetermined as survivors existing outside the structures of official state-based performance in Belarus. I am reminded of a 2014 documentary film about the BFT called *Dangerous Acts Starring the Unstable Elements in Belarus* that described the dangerous acts of the "provocative and subversive shows" of the company

that happen under the “risk [of] censorship or imprisonment.”³⁶ *Staging A Revolution* makes visible a different kind of dangerous act than the one depicted by the documentary: the danger of being made valuable exclusively in relation to political struggles in Belarus—a danger that becomes more acute in relation to the company’s aging in the UK as they become less relevant in Belarus, and likewise as the political climate in Belarus ages.³⁷

Therefore, *Staging A Revolution* re-produces the BFT as relevant in the face of their own fragility as an aging political theater company. UK audiences help construct an ageless body for the BFT that will not fall prey to the dangers of expiring as a theater within a zone of timely political opposition. The sourcing of taboo topics for the BFT to produce in the UK at Let’s Act! produces substitutions that allow the company to maintain a flexible value of survival unhinged from for political conflict in Belarus.

Importantly, this is done through performances of surrogation: the simple gestures of solidarity and empathy prop up the BFT as survivors across multiple times and places and not only in Belarus. And it is here that we see an important distinction between the form of surrogation that produces an anti-aging effect in *King Lear* and the surrogation that produces a surviving body for the BFT as a protocol of liberal human rights practice. In *King Lear*, the idea of the spectacle secures an ageless body of the King for the purpose of extending sovereign power and inheritance. A spectacle of anti-aging is therefore based, in theory, on sovereignty and the forms of aging constructed specifically in conjunction with the nation-state. In contrast, the gesture of anti-aging that produces

³⁶ See press release for *Dangerous Acts*.

³⁷ The problem of aging is one that I often encounter in my research about the BFT. I was once warned not to write a dissertation about the company because they are *too* timely and therefore would soon cease to be relevant: “sooner than later their political cause will expire and then what?!”

the BFT as an ageless, surviving body at the festival is intended to offset the dangers of being positioned within a sovereign frame, either official or oppositional. This distinction between spectacles and gestures is not merely a difference of vocabulary, but a tension rooted in two very different modalities of historical thought.³⁸ I suggest that the appeal of its “simplicity” (as Cavendish writes) against the grand scale associated with spectacle is precisely the way that the gesture navigates a temporal relation outside of a history of political structures. I find it telling that the term “spectacle,” when evoked in relation to *King Lear* and other BFT productions about state power, always carries with it a critique: spectacle is a manipulative performance of power that produces political temporal difference. And yet, “gesture” seems to avoid this critique since, as in the case of the festival celebrating the BFT, it is evoked as an all-encompassing and tenuously benign space precisely because it does not need to address history as a political end. This is to say that whereas spectacle forms the performance modality of sovereignty that recognizes historical continuity and discontinuity as a conflict of aging, liberal human rights is sustained through the performance of gestures. Gestures seamlessly incorporate and abstract from all historical political tensions through a flexible body of survival.

This surrogation of the BFT as survivors is not without its own performance demands for the company. As mentioned by Attenborough, the BFT are prompted to provide a wider range of topics for liberal audiences in order to help them test their liberal character. The gestures of solidarity with the BFT that provide life support also require a labor from the BFT to sustain their status of flexible survival. A closer look at

³⁸ Indeed, one more readily traces “gesture” in relation to ethical considerations of human beings and formulations of global connectivity in popular discourse on performance (see Cavendish and Zaintz).

my field notes from the festival provides insight into the production of survival and its labor from members of the BFT:

After the show the first night I spot the BFT's production and technical manager, Sveta, on the café terrace in front of the theater. I met Sveta in 2013 along with some of the actors in the company while sitting in on BFT training sessions in Minsk for my dissertation research. At the time there were many foreigners visiting the "xhatka," but I was afforded a special privilege because of my language skills. I was a foreigner with whom many of the actors—specifically those who didn't speak English very well—could easily converse, and at times I was useful for impromptu translation assistance. On the café terrace, Sveta invites me to join her and other members of the Staging A Revolution production crew, some Belarusian and some from the UK. I sit down to a conversation about which Russian words the non-Belarusian crew has picked up during the festival. Later, a conversation arises about the production schedule for the festival. Sveta—often the only female among the tech crew—gives me a story about her personal experience over the course of the past month preparing for this event. She says, "We complain about our schedule in Minsk, but this is much harder." The hardship she refers to has to do with the fact that the company is staging ten productions in two weeks during Staging A Revolution, which averages to mounting a new show less than every two days. I open up my festival brochure and realize that the first week of the festival, the week I missed, featured a new production every night. In the second week they will mount a new production every other night. Not only was the turnaround very fast during the first week of the festival, but these performances were held in "secret" locations around London to

mimic the mobility of the BFT in the first years of their existence in Belarus. During these years in Minsk they would perform in makeshift spaces such as clubs, homes, and outdoor spaces such as the forest. Sveta had just emerged from a week of coordinating productions around the city of London and was exhausted from the amount of moving around and the speed of the festival. One of the technical staff on the UK side also comments on the festival's difficulty. He says that if it was just one show from the BFT for two weeks then it would be "the easiest tech set-up" (which makes sense since the company is known for minimalistic sets and props in makeshift spaces in Belarus), but the mounting of a new show basically every other day makes it challenging.

Sveta's comments about how exhausting it is to move around London highlight the labor of being survivors that keeps the BFT alive. Sveta and members of the BFT maintain survival by constantly reworking and repositioning themselves as endangered performers on the edge of extinction. This requires a gendered labor from Sveta that must produce the ageless company through performances of survival. This labor is rarely mentioned in reviews of the BFT that underscore that the BFT continues to work and make theater in a "tireless" fashion: "the tireless Belarus Free Theatre, in short, is more than a theatrical marvel. It is, arguably, a theatre of firsts: the first contemporary company to survive, function and flourish both in exile and at home, despite repression" (Rocomora). What becomes invisible in these assessments of the tireless bodies of the BFT survivors is that this tirelessness, which is actually a performance of ageless survival, is grounded in tiring and increasingly speedy work of multiplying sites of survival in order to stay alive as a theater company.

The cost of the performance of survival for the refugee theater is the limited possibility of integration into the nation. Whereas the BFT labors to surrogate a value of precarity in order to ensure the security of the nation for UK audiences, this labor also produces them as precarious over and over again. As a production, *Staging A Revolution* produces a staging of survival that both extends the life of the company through liberal gestures of life support while equally ensuring that they remain on the precipice of death, unable to integrate into mainstream, national structures of belonging. This does not happen through the death of the BFT, but precisely through keeping them in a state of survival. If in *Time of Women* the BFT show how time is constructed to limit the participation of women in political processes, then I hope to have shown how survival is a time constructed at *Staging A Revolution* to limit refugees or outsiders from participation in the nation. Here, the construction of survival forms an untimely body that cannot integrate into mainstream global theater. The BFT must adopt and adapt to multiple sites of producing survival without ever having the possibility of becoming mainstream. In interviews I have conducted with the company, they have expressed to me the problem of wanting to become mainstream rather than remain a refugee theater that becomes valuable not because of their “artistic merits” but the fact that they exist.

In *Staging A Revolution* sovereignty is reinforced through the process of global connectivity with the bodies of refugees that remain outside the structures of the nation. This recourse to the narrative of survival is important for remedying the very issue of sovereignty and political resolve that liberal audiences cannot muster because of the crisis of liberal dis-orientalism. Instead, solidarity with those outside of history becomes the

form of writing a liberal history through the bodies of those who are condemned to not having a history.

Conclusion: Surviving History

This chapter has argued that survival is the temporality through which liberalism is reproduced in a moment when the ability to speak to political ends and determine an orientation toward a political future is lost—a condition that I have called dis-orientalism. Survival, which is a spatial relation of those caught outside a system of integration, is also a historical relation of past, present and future that constructs a present moment that exists outside of history. Instead of a single calibrated system that functions to “grow” the backward and immature places of the world, the crisis of liberalism articulated at *Staging A Revolution* reveals not so much an *end* of history as an emerging condition where some people are historical while others are denied access to history altogether.

In his book *Omens of Adversity*, historian David Scott describes this new political relation to history as one of “time standing away, so to speak, from its conventional grounding and embeddedness in history, its modern handmaiden, so that time and history, once barely distinguishable seem no longer synchronized - as though time had found itself betrayed by history, or that history now confronted us as inauthentic time, the irreversibly lapsed time of our former anticipations of political futurity” (2). Scott identifies an experience of time that is not in line with a teleology embedded in history (in its traditional sense), but instead characterizes the contemporary moment as a preoccupation with the *past* instead of the *future*, where “the traces of futures past hang like a voile curtain over what feels like an endlessly extending present” (6). Scott’s

description of the “endlessly extending present” is another way of understanding the temporality of survival.

Although Scott sees the production of the consensus-building present tense in political and legal institutions, *Staging A Revolution* reveals that this present tense is also created and performed through embodied gestures between different parties that intersect in the public sphere. Survival is the performance that produces a *history without history* in response to a crisis of liberalism as a political future. The BFT’s fringe status was elevated to a universalizing value of survival that connected the territories through which they traveled while simultaneously covering up for the disenfranchised bodies that struggle to survive *within* the domestic, colonial histories of this globally connected space. The members of the BFT were the chosen bodies that could appease the anxieties of liberal character by reinvesting in liberal identity. They propped up a particular ageless body that should be understood as a continuation and extension of liberal identity and its white, European character. This process of surrogation was the human rights performative of survival.

The construction of survival in *Staging A Revolution* works through the process of surrogation. As provocatively highlighted by the example of the BFT, survival is a process of auditioning stand-ins or “candidates for succession” to replace not a dead body, as Roach would have it, but the aging project of the BFT in relation to political struggle in Belarus. Survival, as a performance of anti-aging, allows the BFT to multiply social justice causes and sites through which they can continue to survive while simultaneously limiting the possibility of their change in status from refugee theater to world-class theater. This procedure of anti-aging anticipates a healthy restoration of an

oppressed group within a political structure, but keeps it perpetually out of reach by never making a historical destination available. The human rights performative of survival not only creates a body that exists on the precipice of extinction, but produces this precipice over and over again through abstraction and expansion. As a colonial form of expansion the human rights performative does not work through impositions of culture, land grabs or flat-out erasures of bodies. Its colonizing logic works through a therapeutic operation: it pays special attention to the oppressed and cares for these bodies all the while limiting their access to any real forms of health. In this process of surrogation, the body does not die; it is kept alive.

When Roach originally wrote about surrogation twenty years ago he might not have foreseen its importance in an era marked by a new construction of history of present time under liberal human rights discourse. A central argument in this chapter is that we must re-visit the stakes of Roach's notion of historical transmission as an "imperfect fit" across temporal and spatial divides at a time when the focus on survival has mitigated our ability to see such substitutions. Instead of discussing constructions between the past, present and future through the surrogation of dead bodies (Roach),³⁹ what if we asked questions about the construction of the present tense through the bodies of survivors?

What if instead of attending to the dead we look to the construction of the "living dead"

³⁹ The dead body also serves a prominent role in political process in Central Europe as described by Katherine Verdery. Verdery's book *Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (2013) outlines a growing field of interest in dead bodies, bodily remains, and monuments in the context of post-Soviet transition in Central/East European. The discovery of mass graves, the reburial of "national heroes," and the removal of monuments depicting extraordinary Soviet bodies are examples of ways in which the body participates in political acts of re-signification that materialize spatial-temporal ideas. The unique advantage of the body in politics, according to Verdery, is that it provides a concreteness that "nonetheless transcends time, making past immediately present" (27). Verdery approaches the politics of death and restoration of dead bodies to the nation as a marker of a new historical relation of the past and present. This chapter draws on her insights of the use of bodies, but departs from the dead body by giving more attention to the bodies of the "living dead", i.e. refugees and survivors, in human rights discourse.

as survival becomes a potent site for a politics of liberalism and human rights. *Staging A Revolution* points us in the direction of the questions: who is caught in the present tense? Who benefits from the performance of survival?

CHAPTER TWO

The Feminist Translator in the Era of Testimony: The Belarus Free Theater's Repertoire in Minsk

In the summer of 2013 I travel to Minsk, Belarus to watch a repertoire of plays from the Belarus Free Theater (BFT). There is a British journalist in the audience the evening I attend the production of the BFT's play Minsk 2011: A Reply to Kathy Acker. He is writing an article about Belarus for British GQ magazine.⁴⁰ Following the performance we have a short conversation outside the theater space while he waits for an interview from one of the actors getting out of costume. He asks me a question about the BFT: why do you think they are able to perform? I understand that he is asking me to respond to the persistent refrain that accompanies the Belarus Free Theater abroad. The company is categorized as a banned theater collective in their homeland and he wants me to contextualize for him the performance he just saw and its possibility of appearance. I hesitate. What do I say? Am I supposed to account—as the company often does—for the number of times I have seen the police stop by the private theater the company runs in a residential area of Minsk? Do I try to position their banned status as a “cat and mouse”

⁴⁰ The article, which the journalist described as the magazine's one “serious reportage” piece every issue, was published in hardcopy in March 2014. It can also be found in digital form. See Fletcher, “Belarus: Europe's Secret State”.

game between the company and the state as a US journalist once mentioned in 2006?⁴¹

Or do I suggest that the real problem is not that they are unable to perform in Belarus, but that they have become pariahs in theater circles in Minsk because people do not want to associate with the reputation that has been built-up around them as an oppositional theater?⁴² I decide to turn the question around and ask him what he thinks. He answers, “Lukashenko [Belarus’ president] does not want to close them down because he wants to present a liberal face. The theater is safe and contained”. Before I have a chance to respond, company member Marina Yurevich comes out from the theater to answer the journalist’s questions. The journalist switches his attention to Yurevich and asks her a version of the same question he asked me, prompting her to account for the dangers of performing the BFT’s repertoire in Belarus. I watch Yurevich intently as she answers the question. Yurevich, a petite blonde, is polite and friendly and informs the reporter that things have changed in Minsk over the years and they are able to perform without much problem. But she also adds that, “two weeks ago the police came”. The reporter pushes more on the topic of the company’s relation with the government. Yurevich brings up a story of how a few years ago they were arrested in the theater. As I observe this exchange between Yurevich and the journalist, I realize that not only does her speech seem rehearsed, but it is also being prompted by the journalist to address a very specific context of Minsk 2011 that revolves around state-enforced violence.

⁴¹ See Rodriguez, “In Belarus, theater goes underground”.

⁴² Belarusian theater director and critic, Tania Arcimovič, brought such a qualification to my attention in a personal interview in 2013.

The scene of this exchange between the British journalist and Yurevich strikes me as very familiar. In conducting research about the Belarus Free Theater (BFT) over the past five years, I have learned that questions such as the ones posed by this reporter are the rule rather than the exception for how the foreign press addresses the company. These questions are a flag for a collective international imaginary of human rights theater discourse that tries to understand the specific context of repression for theater projects in Belarus. Indeed, I too began my research in 2011 with a similar line of inquiry. These questions try to grasp the conditions that surround the production of the BFT's work through a prism of censorship that measures the oppression of the company. *What is allowed onstage and what is not? How difficult is it for the actors to obtain visas for travel abroad?* I argue that the problem with these questions is that inevitably force the BFT to speak through an over-determined idea of context: state-enforced political oppression and violence. This context of state-enforced oppression is performed through the female body that confesses to the conditions of violence. Typically the voice of the BFT is another woman, co-director Natalia Koliada, who has tirelessly addressed the foreign press for years and who many company members credit with the success of the company.⁴³ Since Koliada has lived in the UK since 2011, I notice Yurevich is called on to address journalists in Minsk from Russia and the UK (including scholars such as myself, from the US).⁴⁴

⁴³ In my research I hear many classifications of this woman who garners an immense amount of respect about her work ethic from both company members and from BFT supporters in the UK.

⁴⁴ But it is not just Yurevich's technical proficiency with the language that makes her such a great candidate for representing the company. She also has a provocative story to tell: Yurevich was forced to leave her government theater job at the Army Theater in Minsk and pay a \$10,000 USD fee to the government for touring with the BFT in 2008. Yurevich told this story to two Russian journalists and myself a few weeks prior to her conversation with the British journalist at Minsk 2011. In this story she described how she encountered the work of the BFT—or Free Theater as they are referred to in Belarus—in her final year of

Yurevich and Koliada are paradigmatic figures for testifying to state censorship and abuse for international audiences. Historically, the work of translation in Belarus and elsewhere is associated with the domain of female labor. This translational form of labor simultaneously requires the presence of the female body while also assuring its disappearance in the perception that the female body forms a neutral and transparent vessel of transportation through which to connect distinct linguistic spaces in the reproduction of knowledge. As such, the work of Yurevich and Koliada to traffic knowledge about Belarus between places is often innocently coded in their technical proficiency with the English language—i.e. they serve as translators because they have the “best” English in the company. However, in the testimonial mode through which Yurevich and Koliada translate knowledge about state-enforced violence in Belarus, the bodies of these women do not disappear. Their visibility is required since they serve equally as transmitters of knowledge about violence *and* as evidence of violence inflicted on female bodies (and other feminized bodies) by the state. Their bodies are needed to authenticate an account of the gendered dimensions of state violence.

This chapter departs from a consideration of the labor of the female translator in the reproduction of knowledge about Belarusian context through the repertoire of plays

theater school. After school she was assigned to the Army Theater in Minsk while also performing with the Free Theater. When the company would tour abroad to the Baltic countries and Sweden she would request permission to leave her state theater job in order to attend “master classes”. In 2008, when the BFT was invited to perform their production of *Being Harold Pinter* she was told by the Army Theater that she could not go. She left anyway and was forced to leave from the Army Theater and pay the government a fee of \$10,000 USD to cover the cost of the government sponsored theater education. This sum—an impossible amount for most Belarusians who work in government jobs—was raised abroad through a charitable campaign started by Natalia Koliada of the BFT called the *Крепостная Актриса* (translating to “serf actress”). A campaign was initiated to raise money for Yurevich and to highlight how Belarusian actors were socially and fiscally tied to their government positions and punished for working elsewhere. *Крепостная Актриса* is also the title of a 1963 Soviet musical film that featured a story of a young woman who was bought to be an actress at a court theater in Russia during the turn of the 19th century.

by the BFT. In the first part of the chapter, I analyze the production of *Minsk 2011* to highlight a testimonial mode of translation that happens through the use of the female body—or more specifically through the female “voice” or “confession”. Testimonial is a prominent feature in the BFT’s production of *Minsk 2011* and the use of testimonial distinguishes the company within the broader trend toward documentary-based theater practice in both Belarus and Russia since the early 2000s. According to Russian theater critic Pavel Rudnev, documentary theater emerged as a specifically non-statist phenomenon where the “provinces learned that the stage did not only need to represent a classical hero or a hero from the past, but someone that you could identify with, where you could see yourself, your city and your local education” (Rudnev). The political character of documentary theater in Russia and Belarus is thus its investment in the representation of new subjectivities on stage that resembled the locality of expression within the nation rather than what the state chose as the representation of the nation’s body politic. However, whereas Rudnev categorizes documentary theater as providing a stage where “you see yourself”, this takes on an added dimension in *Minsk 2011* with the incorporation of the body of the actors in testimonial format: the actors own reality became a subject of interest on stage through autobiographical stories. In this way the site for local expression shifts from a mimetic function of “seeing yourself” to a testimonial notion of “being yourself”, a move to change the role of the actor from mere vehicle for the expression of a story to a marginalized subject in their own right. The testimonial form of translation endows the actors with the right of speech through the theatrical mechanism at the same time that it discards theatrical constructs of character and theatricality for a more direct, “authentic”, subjective experience mode of speech. Indeed,

one of the premises of documentary-based and testimonial-based theater is that it no longer needs to traffic in the same tricks—what Václav Havel in the 70s called “alibis”⁴⁵—to circumvent censorship regulations during the Soviet era. The political promise of testimonial productions such as *Minsk 2011* is that they can speak directly to the “here and now” without covering up the real social context.

I argue that this political promise of testimonial in Belarus constitutes a problem when it becomes incorporated into the liberal human rights discourse of free speech. It forms a paradigm that purports to reveal social context in a transparent and neutral manner. But this social context is constructed through a limited understanding of speech that reduces the voice of the oppressed woman to a reiteration of “context” already predetermined through the questions asked by Western reporters. The exchange between the actress Yurevich and the British journalist illuminates this central dilemma: On one hand, it is imperative to speak out against gendered violence initiated by the Belarusian state in order to draw attention to the silenced woman; On the other hand, such a strategy of speaking to the context of state violence reproduces a distribution of spaces between those who seemingly have a positive situation of free speech—the tolerant West European male—and those that have a negative situation of a lack of speech—i.e. the violated Belarusian woman. While testimonial might initially seem like female emancipation, such speech should be regarded skeptically if the female body is a vessel through which the patriarchal desires are reproduced. As such, I argue that a *gendered prism of context* is produced that forms a specific knowledge about the company and the country of Belarus trafficked through the female body.

⁴⁵ See Danaher 115-127 for description of “alibi” in Havel’s work.

Expanding on studies of translation by scholars such as Naoki Sakai, this chapter demonstrates that a liberal form of translation happens through the technique and aesthetic of testimony that requires that the female or feminized voice produce subjective experience as evidence of violence. Sakai has demonstrated that a colonial form of translation presumes to constitute a “bridge” between national spaces when in fact it is the act of translation that produces national difference where there was none to begin with. Drawing on, and departing from, his notion of the bridge, I argue that a different form of translation occurs through the mode of testimonial. Testimonial translation does not necessarily produce official national differences between nations (as in Sakai’s work), but produces the difference between liberal and illiberal contexts while presuming that no translation is necessary, in other words, by presuming universality. This mode of translation revolves around a bifurcated paradigm of individual speech/silence that ultimately underscores the restoration of a whole intergraded individual body that is the ideal of the liberal discourse of the rights bearing subject.⁴⁶

The second part of this chapter moves beyond the liberal mode of translation that authorizes only the gendered prism of state-enforced political and social violence in Belarus. Although Yurevich’s speech reproduces liberal/illiberal distributions of context in the exchange with the British journalist, this does not mean that this is the only way that the BFT’s work is translated. Instead of a neutral vessel through which knowledge is trafficked, the work of the female translator *actively* constructs a context of Belarus for her audience. As such, Yurevich’s testimony contextualizing Belarus was speech and, *at*

⁴⁶ For a detailed study on the significance of the integrated body in liberal discourses of human rights see Anker 4; and Mooney 4-6.

the same time, an act of silence about the context of Belarus. Rather than a testimonial ideal of an authentic voice that seamlessly transports knowledge across space and brings audiences closer to the truth through first-hand account, the translator's work functions as a relational act within a field of investments. Drawing on the labor of female translator to construct "context" in relation to a specific audience, I examine a repertoire of BFT's work in Minsk: *Minsk 2011* and two productions that have never been shown abroad, *New York '79* and *Родные и близкие* (*Relatives and Close Ones*). Although *Minsk 2011* is afforded political value because it testifies to "local context", I demonstrate how *New York '79* might in fact be more "local" in relation to a Belarussian audience. Likewise, I look at how *Relatives and Close Ones* catalyzes a regional (rather than international) audience.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that the political value of the BFT's work resides not in the representation of a different historical "context" in individual productions, but in the set of relations transacted through their repertoire. Similar to the way that an "aunt" in *Relatives and Close Ones* refers to a relational proximity that is not an essential characteristic of the person (bloodline) but configurations of shared space, history, and experiences, the BFT's repertoire does not form a chronological order but a *relatives* set: they announce a field of affiliations between productions and audiences that are multi-directional rather than uni-directional. *Repertoire as relatives* is relational rather than relative, and informs a method of feminist translation that examines the dynamic of specific alliances between productions and audiences. Like relatives, these alliances are the site that needs our analytical eye, asking such questions: *who wants to be related or not related to who and why?*

Minsk 2011: Translating “Context” in Post-Soviet Documentary Theater

On June 27th 2013, I get off a bus that had taken me into a residential neighborhood in Minsk and wait in front of a restaurant called “Apple” (written in English) to be guided directly to the small private house – the хатка/*hatka* (meaning “village house”) as the BFT members call it—for a presentation of the piece *Minsk 2011: A Reply to Kathy Acker*. Earlier Sveta, the production manager, told me that first-time audience members are asked to congregate in front of the Apple restaurant on a main street. They are then lead by a company member to the *hatka*, which can be difficult to find since it is hidden on a side street. Nadia, Sveta’s life partner, finds a small group of ten or so of us and leads us to the house. When we arrive I see that other audience members have also gathered there.

We are led into the theater space and asked to sit on wooden benches and mats on one side of a large room. A projector is mounted against that wall and set-up to project images and videos toward the other side. The house itself is small and the “auditorium” and “stage” consist of two rooms in the house that have been joined together by knocking out a wall. If you look up to the ceiling, you can see the traces of the destruction and the visible remains of the old wall. The rest of the house includes a bathroom, a hallway, a dressing room and a small kitchen/lounge room. The technical set-up for the space is simple with a few pieces of track lighting and a basic sound system that Sveta controls throughout the show from the hallway. At this moment though, Sveta’s role is that of both producer and usher as she directs the flow of audience members to their seats and makes sure to fit as many bodies into the space as possible. This audience is conscious of space efficiency and does such a good job of squeezing into the space that at one point

Sveta suggests that the people sitting on the wooden benches in the back row might want to move up a bit to the *пареп/parter* (meaning “orchestra”). Some audience members laugh at her use of the terminology of theater design to speak of a space where one sits on a mat with their legs crossed and the distance between the “nose-bleed” seats and the “orchestra” is just a few feet. I look around the room at the audience. On the mat in front of me was a man speaking in English that I later learn is a British journalist, and his translator. Around me I recognize what I have now learned is a typical BFT crowd in Minsk: young men and women in their 20s-early 30s, residing in the capital city and dressed fashionably, arriving with friends.

I sit on a mat near the door. I wonder if I am the only person in the room who has already seen this production. A year earlier I had seen *Minsk 2011* as part of the 2012 LIFT Festival at the Young Vic Theater in London and also in conjunction with the Under the Radar Festival at The Public Theater in New York. The production is directly related to the particular context of Belarus as announced by its name, and yet it was actually produced in the United Kingdom and this was the first time the show was premiering in Minsk itself. *Minsk 2011* was produced during a three-week residence in the UK with a good deal of trafficking of actors back and forth between Belarus and the United Kingdom. The spatial disjuncture between the representational space within the production of *Minsk 2011* and its actual site of production underscores the bi-national production structure of the BFT since 2011. In 2011, the BFT’s co-directors (and a few actors) defected to the US and UK following the presidential re-election of Alexander Lukashenko in December 2010. That moment marked the end of exclusively Belarus-made theater from the BFT as the actors from Minsk spent half the year traveling abroad

to create theater work. From 2011 onwards the BFT held performance seasons in both London and Minsk every year. In their Minsk repertoire in 2013 were both foreign BFT productions that came to Minsk *only after* they premiered abroad as well as productions developed in Minsk and shown to local audiences. Although often in my research I refer to the repertoires of BFT productions in London and in Minsk as “parallel”, the term evokes equality between the repertoires that does not capture the complexity of the relationship. Not only does it not register omissions between the repertoires, it more importantly does not account for the flow of the productions as they were created with different audiences in mind. Despite referencing the Belarusian particular in its name and context, *Minsk 2011* was the first BFT production created in the UK after the split production structure.

Before the show begins, Sveta introduces the three directors of the BFT, who have joined the group via a Skype call from London. Nikolai Khalezin, Natalia Koliada and Vladimir Scherban appear on a computer screen that Sveta holds up for us to see. Vladimir (Volodya) does most of the taking, Nikolai (Kolya) smiles his signature big grin and Natalia (Natasha) looks intently into the camera as if she is trying to make out each and every audience member. Volodya announces that *Minsk 2011* was created in the *переломный момент* (meaning “breaking moment”) of 2011. The “breaking moment” he is specifically referring to is when the co-directors (and a few actors) went into exile following Alexander Lukashenko’s re-election. Through Skype, Volodya mentions that *Minsk 2011* was created in response to a work they had made in the middle of 2010 called *New York ’79* and ends by saying that this presentation of *Minsk 2011* will not

feature the original cast of the show and that certain parts of the original play are missing. The reason for this, he adds, will be clear for the audience as they watch the show.

Minsk 2011 begins. The play is devoted to the story of the Belarus capital in 2011 – a year that the piece mentioned did not start on January 1 2011 but 13 days earlier on December 19th 2010. The date refers to the day of elections in Belarus as “a bloody crackdown on a peaceful demonstration against the falsification of the presidential elections” (play text). The off-calendar origin date of the year announces the kind of tracing of the city at stake in the play, which revolves around two intertwined prisms: political repression and sexuality. The reference to deceased US feminist punk icon Kathy Acker is the inspiration for sexuality as socio-cultural lens. The production uses the lens of gender and sexuality through which to mark violent interactions, both physical and metaphorical, in Belarus on multiple levels—between people in Minsk, between the Belarusian state and the people, and finally between the country of Belarus and other countries. *Minsk 2011* draws attention to violence as a sexual order on different social and political levels of reproduction: the patriarchy within the family and between men and women, the patriarchy of the state and the nation’s “father figure” of president Alexander Lukashenko, and the patriarchy of geo-political relations between nation-states that allocates Belarus a feminized and devalued status.

Minsk 2011 focuses on the construction of sexuality through the everyday social practices of the young people in the city. One scene depicts sex work in Minsk that is sanctioned by the government and frames the intertwined relations of sexuality, exploitation and bureaucracy in the country. In one moment, three female dancers working at a strip club in the capital are commanded by their boss to dance for a

government official in order to secure the proper paperwork for the club. The women shed their smocks to reveal enticing black lingerie and dance provocatively as the official sits on a chair and places his briefcase on the floor while watching the show. Later in this scene, an actress playing a dancer (Viktoria Biran) and the actor playing the official (Dzenis Tarasenska) will go to the side of the stage and moan into a microphone to create a sound score that suggests that behind closed doors there are sexual favors being exchanged for official signatures. In another scene, the same actor creates a scene about a young woman who aspires to be an exotic dancer and invites two young men over who claim to have connections with the business. Biran narrates how the two men take advantage of her by getting her drunk. After they leave, the actress drops to the floor and an image of the National Library of Belarus is projected on a white screen behind her. The National Library is a black, octagon shaped building that symbolizes the “new” modern Belarus of president Lukashenko’s government and that has been critiqued for how expensive it was to build and how inconveniently and restrictively is it set-up for the access of knowledge.⁴⁷ She describes how the next day she tries to go to the library to get a readers pass and is unable to receive one. The juxtaposition of her exotic dancing career with her inability to attain a reader pass announces a regime of sex that fails as a promise of women’s control and opportunity. Additionally, there are scenes that deal with restrictions faced by LGBT population in the country. In one such scene a Belarusian LGBT activist living abroad is interrogated by the Belarusian police during a Belarusian pride event; another scene depicts the nighttime (i.e. unsanctioned or underground) activity of LGBT community at a popular gay club that is transformed into a site of

⁴⁷ This library replaced the old Soviet library called the “Lenin’s Library” located in the center of Minsk. The new National Library of Belarus is located in a less central neighborhood in the capital.

revelry, while during the day the same space is a canteen that serves food for local workers. As such, *Minsk 2011* expresses the conflicts and desires of a youthful urban class eager for liberal freedoms of identity and critical of patriarchal structures.

A monologue toward the end of the play puts Belarus within an international framework. It establishes a metaphor for the sex appeal of Belarus in relation to other countries through the violation of the body of one young woman. The young woman (played by Yana Rusakevich) is led to an inevitable act of prostitution in order to gain attention on the world stage. A powerful analogy is drawn between the young woman and Belarus, its lack of “sexy” qualities such as oil, natural resources etc. that would draw the attention of an international public. Instead, the appeal of both woman and country lays in their availability for forceful penetration within the dynamic of economic power disparity.

The very last section of *Minsk 2011* is testimonial in format and delivered by the Belarusian actors who perform with the BFT abroad and return to Minsk to be with their families. The actors come onstage carrying chairs almost as if they are about to engage in a talkback. They sit down and collectively point to the back right corner of the auditorium and in unison recite: “Minsk is right there!” The monologues that unfold are soft and sentimental and consider the harsh theatrics of oppression the bodies of the actors have just performed. The actors describe the disappointments of living in Minsk – some have been fired from their jobs, many do not have a stable job—but also their longing for Minsk and why they return to their country—their families and children, the benches on rooftops on which they enjoy the ‘other side’ of the city with lovers. One actress says: “Minsk today is an empty grey space containing nothing, just a constant sense of waiting and

terrible anguish. The only joy is snow. It covers the grey, the bitterness and resentment, with a clean white sheet. And on that sheet, the desire to write a very different history of our city.” As such, the ‘right’ of ‘there’ that begins the testimonial speech from the actors might orient the audience toward a Minsk that is close and yet invisible, i.e. not sexy enough as mentioned in Rusakevich’s monologue about prostitution for an international public. And yet, on the other hand, the ‘right’ of ‘there’ also seems to be an orientation toward a future desire for Minsk, a prophetic place for the country that does not yet exist.

Minsk 2011 is a blend of production methodologies and perspectives familiar to students of post-Soviet theatrical developments known as “New Drama”. New Drama occurs at a convergence between the historical encounter between Russian playwrights and British “In-Yer-Face” playwriting (exemplified in the writings of Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane among others) in the late 1990s and the Royal Court Theater’s visit to Moscow in 1999 when the techniques of verbatim theater and document-based performance were introduced and later developed by institutions such as Teatr.doc in Moscow (Beumers and Lipovetsky). Verbatim theater was a method for assembling texts from testimonials and interviews conducted with people. Represented on stage were literally the words—indeed “word for word” in verbatim technique—of everyday people rather than words created by playwrights. Recalling Rudnev’s articulation of the political potential of documentary theatre, the documentary theater boom in the 2000s and its investment in “new subjectivities” allowed for a focus on “seeing yourself”, both a new site and a new method of capturing a multiplicity of social realities (rather than an absolute truth) through the representation of social marginal groups.

Another particular feature of New Drama is what scholars Brigit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky refer to as a stage language of “hyper-naturalism”, which is a depiction of raw naturalistic details of (most often) sexual violence that shock audiences. The form of hyper-naturalism—which shares with British “In-Yer-Face” theater a focus on sexuality as a site for violence—emerges in the post-Soviet space by extending a genre of dramatic writing during Perestroika known as *Черныха/chernukha* (roughly translating to “black stuff”). In *chernukha* the dark underbelly of violence in late Soviet life was depicted in order to expose the true conditions of life. However, unlike *chernukha*, New Drama is marked by a less moralizing character of “exposing the truth” and depicts the routinization of violence or what Eliot Borenstein calls its “overexposure” in everyday life. The form of violence in New Drama, often depicted in a sexual order, is characteristic of a post-Soviet reality grappling with the paradoxes of “a world in which the private has been made public for the first time, and in which publically owned has been privatized” (Borenstein qtd. in Beumers and Lipovetsky, 37). Therefore, violence in New Drama is not represented as an egregious abnormality in society but on the contrary it is the normative aspect of communication that holds different realities together.

In Belarus, there is a different history of post-Soviet theater production, mostly influenced by the fact that New Drama-oriented work never gained the same institutional and mainstream status that it has in Russia. Among artists-intellectuals in Minsk, the narrative is often circulated that the theater studios that mushroomed during the Perestroika years in the late 80s, and that later developed into an alternative theater scene

in the early 1990s,⁴⁸ “disappeared” in 1994 when Lukashenko came into power and a new, state-heavy, program of ideological production was renewed. The loss of these theaters from the country’s theatrical history and the consolidation of state theaters in 1994 lines up with a popular narrative of the country’s post-Soviet “time-warp”: the perception that Belarus, in distinction to its neighboring nation-states, devolves in a backwards direction toward a strong, centralized state, insulated political and economic system rather than toward a globally inclusive country that participates in the European market and embraces forms of independent social and financial ventures. In theatrical terms the myth of the Belarusian “time warp” assumes that independent theaters have been erased from history or continue to function underground. Of course, this myth is both partially true and false. While it is true that there is no mainstream equivalent to Teatr.doc in Belarus, a wave of non-state sanctioned playwriting emerges in the mid-2000s (although many of the playwrights found an audience, and more importantly funding, in Russia first).

The BFT is one of these companies. The BFT’s documentary-oriented practice paralleled a “theater of document” mentioned by Rudnev where source materials such as legal, newspaper and testimonial documents served as the basis for the construction of theatrical scripts about social issues in the country. Yet, *Minsk 2011* highlights one of the features of the BFT’s work that has distinguished them from other theaters in Belarus. Not only does their documentary theatre allow the audience to see itself, but in the testimonial format the actors are being themselves. The actors become the vehicle of their

⁴⁸ I hear this a lot in my conversations with independently oriented theater artists in Minsk. In October 2015 I went to a lecture with a Ukrainian theater producer. A Belarusian academic who teaches dance asks the lecturer, “is there an example in Ukraine of independent theaters that appeared in the early 90s and then disappeared. We only have one theater from that time — InZhest — that continues to work”.

own marginalized voice, given the right to speak themselves. This right is furthermore reflected in the BFT's selection of student actors for their Fortinbas theater school who are often not professional actors but youth that the company deems as having something potentially (and politically) important to say.

In part, *Minsk 2011* constructs a particular context of gender and violence in Belarus through a form of documentary practice rooted in actor's bodies that testify to their own experience of recent events in Belarus. And even when not directly related to the personal stories of the BFT actors, the source material written and assembled for this production is created in response to the immediate situation of the "breaking moment" in the aftermath of 2011. As such, *Minsk 2011* constructs a local context through immediacy with a situation and through the authenticity of the voices of those who participated directly in the documented context. This form of "direct speech" is tied equally with the effect of immediacy, i.e. the event just happened or is ongoing, as it is with the subjectivity and authenticity of the testimonial first-person perspective. In his article "In the Age of Testimony", historian Bain Attwood describe a shift in the production of documentary knowledge in the post-Cold war era dominated by human rights discourse. As in the 60s/70s oral history narratives "from below" served as sources from which to glean a different perspective on reality, Attwood writes that the focus of testimonial practice today is on what he describes as "transmission" rather than "acquisition". In this mode of history telling, the keywords that construct "context" in documentary practices are no longer those of "critical distance" nor "objectivity" but ones that provide for a transgenerational intimacy such as "presence", "experience" and "authenticity" (Attwood). Because *Minsk 2011* makes use of the testimonial "direct speech" it has been

well received internationally as a quintessential human rights theater production. Its quality of intimacy serves to legitimize and validate the production's value as a site of knowledge about Belarus.

Scholars of theater and human rights critique the proliferation of verbatim-style documentary theater for its orientation that collapses context into an erotics of personal testimony. Some, like Christina Wilson, argue that not enough weight given in the play to larger structural issues in that society or to historical contingency. She writes that modes of knowledge grounded in the “new aesthetics” of the affective, intimate and personal dimension of testimony need to be balanced with notions of context rooted in critical distance (Wilson, “Challenging the Fetish of Verbatim” 121-137). Indeed, a renewed call for context has emerged to offset the dangers of individual testimonials within theater productions. But what kind of historical and social context would be necessary? And is it not already the case that *Minsk 2011* produces a context of gendered violence in Minsk in 2011?

Instead of solving the problem of testimony by balancing it with more context as suggested by Wilson, what if the question were posed differently: what is the translational context in which testimony is produced? Let us remember that in the anecdote between Yurevich and the British journalist that begins this chapter, the questions the journalist poses to the BFT actress are guided by a desire to understand the social and political context of the play. He asks for more contextualization and Yurevich responds through testimony. Therefore, I argue that testimony in the reception of *Minsk 2011* was a mode of translation that secured a very specific context of Belarus that revolves around state-enforced violence. Testimony and context are co-constituents in a

process of exchange rather than separate dramaturgical functions whereby one (testimony) is more subjective and the other (context) is more critical and objective. In *Minsk 2011*, it is testimony that both organizes material within the production and is likewise the translational parameter for the reception of the production. What the exchange between Yurvich and the British journalist produces is a contextualization that divides space between liberal and illiberal contexts grounded in the testimony of the female and feminized body.

Here the question of translation, and Sakai's articulation of translation as producing difference rather than bridging it, becomes important. For Sakai, the two language unities are represented as two equivalent resembling one another and it is precisely because they are represented in equivalence and resemblance that it is possible to determine them as conceptually different (Sakai 16). With the testimonial mode of translation there is a different operation at work. Sakai's model produces distinct national contexts as part of international relations by presuming and anticipating different contexts (the inter-function). With the testimonial mode of translation, what is produced is a distinction between liberal and illiberal spaces that, while equally contextualizing space, does not presume difference but presumes universality. In other words, it presumes that no translation is even necessary because the questions that prompt this operation have been thoroughly de-nationalized and delinked from linguistic difference. The ideal of the "bridge" in national-linguistic translation is required only if there is already an assumed space of difference that must be bridged. The ideal of the testifying female or feminized body assures that no bridge is necessary as the confession erases context. Unlike Sakai's site of official geopolitical translation between nations, the feminized body enacts the

universalizing operation—care for the violated woman—because it is formed through gendered difference rather than national difference. Although this difference produces very specific contexts of sexual liberation, it does so by erasing the contextual questions that actually instantiate the operation of division, what I refer to as the *gendered prism of context*. The *gendered prism of context* is produced through a de-contextualized universal spectrum of liberal progress in relation to gender and sexuality (women's rights). We forget that the journalist asks questions. We forget about translation. We hear only the confessional speech of Yurevich. I argue that the patriarchal operations of context that form, in relation, the testimonial exchange are made invisible in order to re-appear as testimony through the *all too* visible female body.

After context has been erased through the *all too* visible female body, it then re-appears in a newly reduced form to separate liberal from illiberal spaces. Additionally, this reduced form of context serves as a tool for analyzing the aesthetic practice. One example of this transaction in the reception of *Minsk 2011* in London will suffice (because like the exchange with the British journalist it is not an exception but a rule): “if it were not for the title, *Minsk 2011*, one could easily mistake the piece as from 1979: this is an exercise in old skool agit-prop, and there are moments when, regardless of the message, the media of nudity, screaming and bodypaint feel like unhelpful clichés from a bygone era of radical theater. But context is everything: Belarus is Europe's last dictatorship and this banned theater company does come from an extreme time and place” (*Time Out London*). This reviewer makes the argument that it is “context”, i.e. an extreme time/place, which makes the production relevant and timely despite what he categorizes as an outmoded and dated form of aesthetic and bodily technique. As such, he

reproduces a spatio-temporal logic that traces a continuum of aesthetic practices by virtue of political freedoms – i.e. in this case the theatrical “past” is still relevant in Minsk because the country has yet to gain the political and artistic freedoms of countries in Western Europe. The quality of *Minsk 2011* being out-of-sync with contemporary aesthetic technique is reduced to context as logic of development.

As such, I argue that “balance” as a representation strategy between context and testimony is inadequate because testimony is a mode of translation that contextualizes by erasing context exchange from its purview. Testimony as translation brings into focus the stakes of a liberally determined circulation of context(s). In the next section, I examine how a methodology provided by a female translator provides a way of analyzing productions in the BFT’s repertoire beyond the bifurcation of individual testimony and objective context.

New York ‘79: Liberal Speech and the Microphone

Fast forward to the evening following the performance of *Minsk 2011* in 2013. I arrive at the *hatka* at 7pm to watch the production that Volodya had mentioned in his opening address the previous night. *New York ‘79* has never been shown outside of Belarus, certainly not in the UK or the US.⁴⁹ The title of *New York ‘79* references a Kathy Acker short story by the same name written in 1981 and considered a classic of US queer punk literary prose. The crowd again looks like the crowd from the previous evening. The new décor in the theater is bright, glitzy, lushly decorated and theatrical in its style. A sparkly gold curtain hangs between the hallway and the large room and the audience enters

⁴⁹ It should be noted that in November 2015 the production was shown with *Minsk 2011* at the BFT’s *Staging A Revolution* festival in London, England. At the time of my research in 2013 it had not been.

through the curtain and is seated in a configuration that resembles a club/cabaret. It is a marked change from the rather sterile and minimal setting of *Minsk 2011*. This evening there is no direct address from London through Skype by the directors and I am not aware of any foreigners in the space with the exception of myself. I take out my tape recorder and decide to surreptitiously record as much of the production as possible since I am unsure if I will ever see it again and the text has never been published (*Minsk 2011*, for example, has been translated, published and distributed through Oberon Books).

New York '79 begins. Like *Minsk 2011*, the lens of gender and sexuality is the site of exploration. But unlike the production the previous night, there is a celebratory tone. The play includes queer punk aesthetic practices you might find in the New York underground scene of the Acker era: graffiti, body paint and a direct, “in your face” address via a microphone. The actors speak often in spoken word fashion into a microphone and the set looks like a runway with a back wall with white paper that the cast sprays in graffiti-style images. In one playful scene the actors arrange themselves behind a gold curtain, lit to reveal only their silhouettes, and present evocative sexual positions that demonstrate various forms of polyamorous and non-heteronormative relations. Although less colorful than the graffiti and paint in other scenes, this juxtaposition of bodies behind the screen strongly evokes the illustrative drive of the production. This illustrative drive is painterly—unruly, destructive and homemade—rather than exhibiting realistic tendencies of capturing a normative and established reality. The content offered is selections of Western feminist writings from that era. The production uses bodily aesthetic forms to enact a liberatory repertoire of sexual possibility.

That night I leave the theater after seeing *New York '79* and take down a few notes about the relationship between this production and *Minsk 2011* the night prior. A striking feature specific to both *New York '79* and *Minsk 2011: A Reply to Kathy Acker* is the artistic use of the microphone. The productions use the microphone in two divergent ways. In *New York '79* the aesthetic technique of the microphone is drawn from the Acker era in the 70s and 80s and a tradition of spoken word events and literary readings in underground clubs. The microphone functions in a presentational manner to “get your voice out” and becomes a technology of amplifying a particular message about sexual politics. It seems to extend the strength and vibration of a particular message. *Minsk 2011* features a different kind of microphone. In this production the microphone is unattainable and instead it is the struggle for the microphone, and ultimately the failure to reach it, that is represented. The opening sequence of *Minsk 2011* features a microphone at the front of the stage and one by one different actors approach the microphone and then step back and either raise a flag, clap or look at their watch. Each time they are carried away by a group of actors dressed in black uniforms. In between each ascent to the microphone, Viktoria and Yana, who are dressed in domestic frocks with their hair up held back in scarves, sweep the stage.

The plays relate two different political historiographies linked to the technology of the microphone. In *New York '79*, one can relate the use of the microphone to traditions of protest and political action in feminist movements in the United States from the 1960s-70s. The microphone corresponds to a hallmark of Western feminist theory grounded in the notion that subjective experience can form a political claim. The microphone is a technology that relays identity positions—specifically feminist and queer

positions—from the subjective/personal realm to the objective/public realm. As a technology of amplification it brings a private message into a space of public deliberation and announces the possibility of the claim “the personal is political” that Carol Hanish wrote about in her 1967 manifesto⁵⁰. The microphone draws attention not necessarily to the bifurcated divisions of space we think of as private vs. public or the divisions in knowledge production we think of as subjective vs. objective but, on the contrary, to the techniques through which these spaces/sites are processed and refashioned as politically salient. The microphone is the critical performance tool of *demonstration*, in both political and theatrical senses, that forms the practice of liberal democracy in the tradition of places such as the United States. In her work on performance and citizenship, May Joseph writes that performance of identity is a “distinctly US phenomenon” whereby identity must be performed and articulated in order to make a claim to citizenship (Joseph 11). What Joseph’s framework allows is for a focus on the techniques through which identity can be expressed and counted (i.e. how it is amplified and politicized) rather than on the solid content of what is represented (i.e. the who of identity). Her argument considers identity as a *process and technique of claiming rights*, to which I will add: it is also about the technology of rights claims, i.e. the microphone. I argue that the microphone is not a neutral channel through which testimony is projected, but a performance-enhancing tool that amplifies a specific rights claim.

Minsk 2011 also accentuates the microphone as a technology of amplifying a political claim, except that the desire for a mode of speech produced through the microphone is also a site of danger. Microphones have a history in Soviet Belarus and

⁵⁰ Exemplified in the publication and circulation of Carol Hanisch’s 1967 text “The Personal is Political” that attests to the need to bring subjective and personal experiences to bear on political and public life.

post-Soviet Belarus that reserve their use to officials for public speeches. The liberal desire of the microphone has an illiberal bedfellow that is traced throughout *Minsk 2011*. This microphone “taps” or captures speech and has real effects for bodies by virtue of the way that it extends the reach of words across space. These microphones are to be avoided at all costs. It is best to be silent. Therefore, *Minsk 2011* laments the inaccessibility of a testimonial culture by presenting a history of the microphone that constitutes a legitimate threat rather than a celebratory claim. While conducting research in Minsk in 2011 the threat of the microphone was further accentuated in the aesthetics of the protest culture that arose from a state-enforced ban on public assembly and verbal performance of dissent. What became known as the “clapping protests” of 2011 used collective clapping in public space to express dissent. Without the accessibility of the microphone, the collective sonic crescendo of multiple bodies clapping together announced the desire for demonstration. Following the protests, the clap was also circumscribed as a threat by the state and banned.

The two production, *New York '79* and *Minsk 2011* reveal is that what is at stake is the political nature of amplifying and extending the sonic body into public space—whether through microphones or through clapping. The first champions the freedom the microphone affords while the later is wary of the co-optation of the microphone as it captures evidence for punishment.

Minsk 2011 stages a history of state censorship as it places limits on freedom of identity and identification within Belarus. The limited use of the microphone leads to various creative tactics of political mobilization that have links to the theater. In a famous example of a green grocer who puts up a sign “Workers Unite” in his shop, Czech

playwright/dissident Václav Havel writes that an “alibi” is a performance of an ideological script that is used to cloak their personal interests in the rhetoric and language of ideology (here, the greengrocer uses the language of working class unite). Alibis are performance tactics that secure seamless unity between individuals and the state when in fact there are ruptures and game playing involved (qtd. in Danaher 117). For Havel—a prominent advocate for free speech—the alibi is a debased form of social relations because it limits the freedom of the individual: it is *too* theatrical and promotes an illusion or false intention through performed games. However, other scholars have noted that the theatrical form of politics during the Soviet era was critical for testing the boundaries of free speech. In her book *the End of The Theater Epoch*, Marina Davydova notes that the theatrical orientation of Russia during the period of late socialism trained people to understand a form of double speak. Davydova argues that “Russia in the period of late socialism was not a literature- but a theater-centric country”, she suggests that theater provided a site for “testing the boundaries of free speech” in ways that other media and formats could not. Specifically, the possibility of the theater to traffic in embodied non-language based forms that could escape the censors trained the public to understand a form of double-speak linked to a necessary dimension of theater’s robust signifying system that was not limited to direct speech (qtd. in Hanukai). The “end of the theater epoch” noted by Davydova refers to the emergence of post-Soviet documentary theater and verbatim-styles of theater production that privilege direct speech and dispense with tactics of alibi (presumably no longer needed). For Davydova there is something subversive in the theatrical scene that manufactures alibis to test the limits of speech production.

Pause. I realize that I have forgotten to turn off the microphone in my bag when recording *New York '79*. I play back the track and it seems that very little has been captured because the audience members next to me are too noisy and little can be heard from the actors on stage. I think to myself that although the microphone in *New York '79* is of the celebratory character, there was also another microphone in the room, my own, and I seem to have done a bad job of “tapping” this production. I continue to ponder the double microphones in the theatrical scene of *New York '79*.

The situation of the double microphone—the microphone on stage and the stage as a microphone—is dizzying because it ruptures the spatial-temporal dimensions of two productions that speak to two distinct contexts and political historiographies. The titles of the two pieces, *New York '79* and *Minsk 2011*, both feature a date, a year, that suggest a historical temporal development from old to new, from '79 to 2011. Yet, these productions also disrupt the historical order by inserting a city/location: Minsk and New York. Both spatial and temporal marks seem significant to understanding the “response” at the “breaking moment” mentioned by the director Vladimir Scherban. The two different contexts are not meant to construct a linear historical trajectory and the breaking moment highlights this fragmentation. Indeed, the production of *Minsk 2011* represents this very fragmented and irreducible history of sexuality by suggesting that the doctrine of liberal sexual liberation in the United States and United Kingdom—exemplified through the possibility to access the microphone—signals a completely different form of distribution in Belarus, where it is a marker of state violence. And, as Scherban’s Skype remarks suggest, this rupture in time and space affects the possibility of the theatrical production itself. The version of *Minsk 2011* performed in Minsk in 2013 does not

feature the same cast as the London version. The actor Oleg Sidorchyk, part of the initial devising process, was not present for the Minsk version because he was part of the exiled group of company members who since 2011 do not travel to Belarus.⁵¹

The above rupture performs a specific distribution of historical thought that is underpinned by a linear history of the microphone that unfolds into discrete contexts where one has the microphone and the other does not (and finds it dangerous). However, in the theater scene in 2013, other spatial and temporal ruptures emerge that cannot be grasped through this prism. *New York '79* is not created in New York but in Minsk and *Minsk 2011* is not created in Minsk but at the Young Vic Theater in London. The contexts signaled in the titles of the productions do not correspond to the *sites of production* or to the *direction of movement of the "direct speech"*. Although *New York '79* represents a context from somewhere else, it is not directed at an international public in the same way as *Minsk 2011*. Foreign journalists do not seem to be interested in *New York '79*, nor is it published and translated into English. I surreptitiously record the production for this very reason. In this way, *New York '79* despite portraying a different context, might be thought to be a more distinctly a local phenomenon.

Although there are two different historiographies of the microphone in the two productions, there is also always at least one other microphone in the room that undoes the notion of "Belarusian context" offered (or not offered) within the two productions. Certainly the BFT's productions in their Minsk summer repertoire are technologies of

⁵¹ The actors are by and large the same group of BFT actors. The BFT keeps a company rather than hiring actors specifically for individual projects. There are though a few substitutions in the cast between the two productions: Oleg Sidorchyk, Viktoriya Biran, Sergei Kvachonak and Kiril Kanstantsinau do not appear in *New York '79* while Svetlana (Sveta) Sugako, the production manager, appears as an actor in *New York '79*. Sidorchyk does not appear in the Minsk version of *Minsk 2011* in 2013.

representation, but do these representations function as microphones or as signs? That is, does the representation of context in *Minsk 2011* amplify a confession about gendered violence that cannot surface publically in Belarus or does it use the context of gendered violence in Belarus as a performative cover for something else (like the green grocer's sign)? To answer these questions, I turn to a third production in the BFT's summer repertoire.

Relatives and Close Ones: Repertoire as Relatives

The first day that I observe the BFT's rehearsals in Minsk, they are doing a run through of their brand new work *Родные и близкие/ Rodniyi i bliskie (Relatives and Close Ones)*. Later that day, I will find out from one of the actors that this was a play that Vladimir Scherban had developed from stories that a blogger was posting on his Live Journal site (or Живой Журнал in Russian). The writer, as I am told, deleted the online journal account by the time that Scherban approached him for the texts and the play itself is a reconstruction of the stories by the writer from memory. The staging was created through the use of Skype between Scherban and the company members. One of the actors tells me that this was a challenging piece to work on through Skype because the production is dimly lit and often Scherban could not see what was happening onstage. When I watch the rehearsal, Scherban is also watching from his office in London. A mac laptop is placed on a shelf against the back wall of the space from which he observes.

In distinction to Scherban, I see everything quite well the first time I see the production in dress rehearsal, but I am stunned by how little of it I understand. It is in Russian, but the actors speak the text-heavy work very fast and I manage to only catch

fragments of the stories. As with many of the BFT's shows the style of this production is reflective and literary since the "voice" is one that remembers and describes events and actions from the past. At times the memories become viscerally present in the space through the emotional life of the actors as well as imaginative and poetic constructions of something important within the stories. The acting technique requires that the actors are responsible for a lot of words and they work to keep the literary language (rather than typical stage dialogue) alive through their breath and the pace of delivery. This genre of speech is neither familiar nor vernacular. I realize that perhaps I had relied on subtitles more than I had thought in the past when watching their productions abroad. After the dress rehearsal, Scherban says that the production is ready to be shown to an audience that coming Sunday and has almost no notes for the actors with the exception of a comment for one actress to take the air out of her monologue because there was too much breathing.

When I watch the production on Sunday I am relieved to find that I now understand quite a bit more of the language. The piece is divided into different sections, or *etudes* as the company calls them, that all start with an uncle, an aunt, a cousin, or some other relation, whose story is then explored through text, images and movement onstage. The piece begins with introductions of all the relations and ends with the cast forming a group image against a wall that resembles a pose for a family photo. The production's structure forms a kind of theatrical family album. As the piece continues the audience realizes that the different stories all tie together on the basis of relations between the characters. What unfolds are relations of relatives that are not necessarily based in blood but on the proximity of living together, i.e. the people you go to school with, the

“aunts” that live down the hall, and those that share the communal back courtyard of the apartment buildings. It seems that the courtyard is the most central spatial unit in the production and I begin to understand that relative relations that solidify are not just about a proximity in space but also in time as the neighbors seem to grow-up and live many years with one another in the same shared space.

The stories themselves revolve around a death of a relative. They are told from a youthful perspective of children who grow up in the courtyards and are involved in, or witness, these deaths. Violence serves as a feature of communication between the relatives and the deaths are all unusual/unnatural and disturbing: for example, one story deals with the guilt of a group of boys who have sexual fantasies about a young girl and while “playing” with her accidentally throw her off a cliff; another describes how two young girls witness their single English teacher/neighbor become delusional and die; and yet another portrays a group of boys who torment and burn the mail of a disabled postman, an “Uncle Sergei”. A dark picture of neighborly relations evolves where children participate in the delinquent behavior as much as they witness the horrors of life around them. The use of light/dark lighting is central to the production concept and light from matches and cigarettes illuminate the space and fill it with a smoky atmosphere. In one particularly memorable scene detailing the death of “Uncle Pavel” whose character smoked filter-less cigarettes called *naniprosy* (*papirosi*), the actors inhale smoke from a cigar and deposit the smoke in mason jars of different sizes. When the smoke is then released it comes out slowly and dances in the darkly lit space.

After the play ends I wait outside of the *hatka* for the actors to emerge from the dressing room after the show. I express how much I enjoyed the production and ask one

of the actors, Andrei, if the company has plans to tour it outside of Belarus. Andrei—a student actor with the company who also works organizing ecological trips on kayaks—answers by saying that he does not think the production will make sense to many people since it is a “post-Soviet” piece. I ask why he thinks others will not understand this piece. He replies to me with a question “do you guys have papirosi?”. In discussing his question, I learn that he thinks that in places such as the US (i.e. the “you guys” in reference to where I come from) there could not be the same familiarity with the courtyard living configurations that mark Soviet and post-Soviet life. *Papirosi* is a Soviet cigar that would be familiar to everyone in Belarus and in other post-Soviet territories but Andrei is uncertain if others would understand the meaning behind the cigar. Before our conversation ends, he mentions the company is trying to arrange for a tour of the production abroad to Kiev in Ukraine where he believes the people will understand the social commentary.

The spatial configurations of the courtyard and *papirosi* that Andrei brings up in *Relatives and Close Ones* point to barrier in translation of images, citations and references that extends beyond the translation of words (cannot be resolved through subtitles). He is commenting on the problem of translating the production for those that do not share the same point of historical reference that he describes as “post-Soviet”. Ukraine, a neighboring post-Soviet country to Belarus, forms a relation that, similar to the relatives in the courtyards of *Relatives and Close Ones*, share historical proximity expressed as a spatial, physical relationship.

However, the historical proximity that Andrei underscores between the two nation-states of Ukraine and Belarus does not always lead to easy communication. Two

years later I attend a lecture in Minsk from a Ukrainian theater producer who has been asked to deliver a talk about theater in Ukraine after the Maidan revolution in the country.⁵² Again, I find myself linguistically lost. At the start of the lecture the Ukrainian theater professional asks if she could speak Ukrainian rather than Russian and the audience in attendance (Belarusian theater professionals) say, “yes, we will let you know if we do not understand”. But it seems that I am the only one that does not understand because I am the only person leaning in for a translation from the woman sitting to the right of me. Furthermore, in the Q&A something phenomenal occurs. The questions that are asked from the audience members to the Ukrainian lecturer are asked in both Russian and Belarusian languages. Each time, the questioners ask for permission before posing their question: “I will speak in Belarusian” or “Is it alright if I answer in Ukrainian?”. The three languages –Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian—operate together in the space. This form of multi-directional translation points to the way that divergent histories are tested between the two nations as well as within the nation (highlighted by the particular political position the Belarusians take in posing questions in Belarusian instead of Russian). Indeed, the content of the conversation tests the similarities and differences between the two countries in terms of theatrical developments as questions are posed to inquire if Ukraine also experienced the phenomenon of the disappearance of studios in the 90s as in Belarus or how the role of the church (more central in Ukraine than in Belarus) affected the different ways that theater dealt with identity in the respective countries.

⁵² The maidan revolution, or *euromaidan*, was a revolution that began in February 2014 and resulted in the ousting of pro-Russian Ukrainian president Yunukovych. Maidan tested, and continues, to test the split character of Ukrainian alliances within the country between Russian and the European Union.

Relatives and Close Ones is more than a production from the BFT's repertoire of pieces that is regionally oriented and does not travel far to Western Europe or US. It is also a mode of thinking about "context" through the work of translation that is relational or, to borrow from the play, about *relatives*. Both the exchanges generated through three languages at the Ukrainian lecture and the neighborly relations in the play point to a multi-directional function of the BFT's repertoire. The BFT's productions do not represent the context of "Minsk in 2011" or "Belarus in '79" or "post-Soviet space". There is no singular meaning. *Repertoire as relatives* brings to the foreground a point about translational labor: it is a practice that links together specific bodies in multi-directional relations rather than a unidirectional channel. "Context" is constituted as a field of investments based on affiliations between productions and audiences rather than a ready-made context about Belarus that resides in an individual production.

Repertoire as relatives is critical for understanding the BFT's repertoire because it shifts analytical focus away from politics as a representation of context within an individual theater production. This "politics as context" has become the site through which the BFT's work has been over-determined through the gendered prism of state-enforced political violence. Such a reading of politics has formed a dead end for scholarship about the international circulation of BFT because it reinforced a bifurcation of "free speech" that only has two sides: either you advocate for free speech by recognizing the importance of representing gendered forms of state-enforced violence in Belarus or, on the flip side, you advocate for silence because the speech only serves to offer a heroic status to the international public. This dead end reduces context to two sides that results in arguments about what kinds of translations of context are better or

worse (on which side) or, similarly, what might be lost in translation when publics cannot fully understand a specific political context. In contrast, *repertoire as relatives* moves beyond this problematic view of translating context. Importantly, *relatives* translation is not synonymous with relativity, which in theatrical terms corresponds to the idea that a production will mean different things to different audiences rather than form an absolute truth. Relativity is a way of analyzing repertoire that privileges temporal change as a multiplication of different meanings across time/space. But because it foregrounds the individual production, or by extension the individual testimony, relativity fails to understand the power dynamic of the repertoires' constitution even through it deconstructs the hierarchical values and top/bottom notion of context. *Repertoire as relatives*, is relational rather than relative, and forms a method for understanding translation as a dynamic between bodies that constitute specific familial alliances. Like relatives these alliances are the site that needs our analytical eye, asking questions of who wants to be related or not related to who and why?⁵³

Returning to the exchange between Yurevich and the British journalist, it is significant that although Yurevich produces the speech of liberal/illiberal distributions of identifying context, it arrives in relationship to a British journalist who prompts a specific script of state-enforced violence and gender. Instead of an empty vessel through which knowledge is trafficked, the work of the female translator actively constructs a particular

⁵³ I draw on, and depart from, Rebecca Schneider's notion of relatives in her book *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Re-enactment*. Schneider examines civil war re-enactments and argues that relatives are a way of understanding the transmission of history as feeling rather than facts. Relatives allows her to question the historical issues of relationality: with whom do we affiliate? To whom do we attribute event? Who within history? Who without? Of course, we know, our pain is *relatives*" (Schneider 53). Schneider considers the relativity of historical account as a question of time, or more precisely as times touching in time in the civil war re-enactments she studies. In distinction, I am highlighting the question of relatives as a touching of space that cannot be reduced to a study of different historical context(s) in the study of how international space is configured through bodily relations.

context of Belarus for her audience. As such, Yurevich's testimony to contextualize Belarus was speech and, *at the same time*, an act of silence about the context of Belarus. The female translator's labor functions as an act of relation within a field of investments rather than as a testimonial ideal of an authentic voice that seamlessly transports knowledge across space and brings audiences closer to the truth through first-hand account. This notion of *repertoire as relatives* does not bring forth a "true" context of Belarusian state-enforced violence but what she brings forth manifests the multi-directionality of translation in relation to who is listening and asking questions. The focus on the female translator is always about a specific relation that the translator sets up between the theatrical production and the audience, which is the site of its politics.⁵⁴

In this chapter, theories of translation and relational bodies come together to argue for a definition of repertoire. In performance studies, "repertoire" has often focused on the reiterative quality of embodied practices that corresponds to the individual body as site of temporally produced change. Or there is a notion of doubling or multiplication of individual cultural productions that signal different things to different audiences that cannot be captured in the static notion of archive. In Diana Taylor's seminal work on the repertoire, the repertoire distinguishes itself from the archive precisely because it

⁵⁴ Because it builds on feminist translation practice, the work of *relatives as repertoire* is different than the concept and practice of "relational aesthetics" coined by Nicolas Bourriaud in his book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998). Bourriaud's concept refers to a practice of art that centers on trans-individual experiences that coalesce around an art object in the formation of social relations. He often refers to experience-oriented art in art galleries where the audiences' relationship with the space forms the art experience rather than the art object itself. Although my concept of *relatives as repertoire* is likewise non-representational and trans-individual, it is a critical tool for understanding the historical construction of affiliations and relations around an art object. The exchange between the feminist translator and the British journalist highlights relational production as a way of understanding liberal human rights as a representational practice of space rather than a celebration of democratic relationality in space as Bourriaud argues. Bourriaud's concept refers to the potential of an art event to catalyze community in one space whereas I am conducting a reading of multiple spaces in the repertoire to unpack the tensions of the multi-directional trajectories of BFT productions. "Relatives" brings to the foreground a critical point about the power dynamics of relational construction as filial relations instead of neutral ones.

transmits knowledge through embodied enactment. For Taylor this is important because the reiterative and embodied aspects of performance are the site through which communities of indigenous peoples in Latin America and other groups in sustain themselves in resistance to representations in the colonial archive (*The Archive and The Repertoire* 49). Taylor understands multiplication as a form of resistance where one sign appears in multiple, contested and situated ways. Taylor's argument about the repertoire is vital to understanding the way that the BFT's productions might mean one thing for one audience and something quite different to others in the transmission of local knowledge. My research on the BFT's repertoire compliments Taylor's notion, but adds to the repertoire an acknowledgment of the relational character of the repertoire neither as necessarily local, regional nor colonial but as *relatives* translation.

CHAPTER THREE

Executing the Crying Onion: The Dramaturgy of Sensation and the Problem of Universality in the BFT's *Trash Cuisine*

When sensation is linked to the body...it ceases to be representative and becomes real. Cruelty will be linked less and less to the representation of something horrible, and will become nothing other than the action of forces upon the body, or sensation (the opposite of the sensational).

-Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*

The co-directors of the Belarus Free Theater (BFT) had been living in exile in the United Kingdom for almost two years when *Trash Cuisine* was created in 2013. By this time, four members of the company had received political refugee status in the UK and the company had gained official registration as a non-profit organization with a residency at the Young Vic Theater in the Southbank of London. BFT's migration to the UK, and their securing of a "second home" at the Young Vic, happened with the support of many notable British artists and dignitaries such as Jude Law and Ian McKellen and under the watchful eye of the press, which rallied to profile the company's story in the media. From 2010-2013, a public narrative of care amassed around the company: the BFT was a must-see theater company who created art under strenuous and dangerous political conditions in Belarus and fled to safety in the UK to continue to pursue their political activism.

This theater of care around the BFT—which included testimonials from notable artists, protests, and fundraising on behalf of the company—fell squarely into a familiar sensationalized trope: the endangered theater company from the East needed to be rescued from their oppressive country by the more mature and tolerant Western country.⁵⁵ In the case of the BFT, the sensational aspects of the company’s story of survival linked them to political oppression and violence in Belarus, a country that the British media often acknowledged they knew very little about.⁵⁶ As such, the BFT promised both an authentic account of violence from Belarus (authentic because it came from members of the company who lived there) and also provided an opportunity for UK audiences to help those in need through channels as simple as paying for a ticket to a theater show or signing a petition on behalf of activist projects initiated by the company.

The BFT’s first production in the UK after their exile revolved almost exclusively around issues of political oppression and censorship in Belarus. The 2012 production, *Minsk 2011: A Reply to Kathy Acker*, staged the figure of the violated and naked woman to address the lack of visibility for Belarusian issues in the global public sphere. Embodying the feminized status of Belarus in global geopolitics, the production addressed the process through which Belarusians need to “prostitute” themselves to gain

⁵⁵ Writing about the liberal reception of Tunisian theater in France, Marvin Carlson argues that the liberal reception of dissident Oriental female artists allows the former colonizer to “play the role” of a superiorly tolerant and culturally committed Western power. See Carlson 201. Likewise, in the UK and the US, the recent solidarity offered to Russian female performance group Pussy Riot serves as an example of how human rights agencies in these countries often highlight the moral superiority of the “saving” country by underscoring conditions of fear, paranoia, and repression in Putin’s Russia. In the 1960s-1980s Cold War era, the figure of the woman was rarely noted in solidarity movements on behalf of East European artists in the UK and US. The role that women’s rights plays in the current climate speaks to a shift in human rights diplomacy away from national sovereignty to issues of national development coded in “softer” issues of women’s rights (thus arguably seeming more neutral and less political). Dimensions of the role of the female in human rights theater is addressed in more detail in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

⁵⁶ See, for example, a review of *Trash Cuisine* from the widely circulated daily publication in London, *The Evening Standard*. See “Trash Cuisine, Young Vic- theater review”.

the attention of the world. However, already by 2013, when *Trash Cuisine* premiered, it was evident that the aesthetic tactics in *Minsk 2011* continued to fuel the sensational narrative that garnered the company global attention as a human rights theater company. Although in part critical of the way that artists achieve global visibility, *Minsk 2011* ultimately played by the same dramaturgical rules of feminized oppression in Belarus. The problem was that cosmopolitan audiences received their work exclusively through identification with the particular context of Belarusian political oppression and violence. It seemed as if there was no part for them to play if they were not playing the roles of victims of human rights abuses in Belarus or, in reaction, victims of the human rights global machinery that demanded of them the role of Belarusian victims. This identity-based dramaturgy was underpinned by a racialization that presented itself artistically by conditioning and constraining the kind of dramaturgy available to the company.

This chapter examines *Trash Cuisine* as a response to the problem of an identity-based model of human rights dramaturgy. In distinction to *Minsk 2011*, *Trash Cuisine* is structured through a series of vignettes, or “dishes”, that relate stories of capital punishment and state-enforced violence from places around the world and across historical periods, such as Rwanda’s genocide, Great Britain’s cases of capital punishment in the 70s in relation to the IRA resistance, and Argentina’s “Dirty War” in the 70s/80s. It also showcases an international cast of Belarusian, UK, US and Australian actors from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and was performed in English rather than Russian or Belarusian.⁵⁷ While many reviewers of *Trash Cuisine* commented on the

⁵⁷ While *Trash Cuisine* is the first “international” production from the BFT post-exile, the BFT produced an earlier work, *Eurepica. Challenge* (2010), that also featured a multilingual cast of Belarusian and non-Belarusian actors. This prior production addressed the entity of “Europe” through questions of the borders

failure of the production's dramaturgy because it watered down the narrative of state violence in Belarus with other stories—or conversely embraced it easily as a form of global inclusivity—I contend that reading *Trash Cuisine* as a failure for its departures from the particulars of the Belarusian context is a reductive form of dramaturgical analysis that is underpinned by the logics of identity-based politics that continue to cast the BFT as colonial caricatures. Instead, I argue the impulse toward sensation in the production was a dramaturgical experiment, however fragile, that sought to dislodge the BFT from the discursive incarceration of the sensationalized narrative of Belarusian violence. I locate this production within a conversation about the limits of identity-based politics in recent postcolonial theory and studies of global culture, a conversation that has pronounced that the forms of identity politics specific to a previous era of political organization and mobilization for disempowered populations has grown into a dangerous ideological device (Savigliano, “Worlding Dance” 183).

The chapter unfolds in two parts. In the first half, I examine how the staging of the violated body in human rights theatrical practice is tied to the production of a liberal rights-bearing subject. I argue that human rights is a form of international diplomacy that conducts exchange through the factor of the “human body”, a body made visible as lacking a proper right-bearing body. This human body is validated only to the extent that it anticipates the integration of the body back into a de-corporealized national body politic. I call this form of diplomacy “human rights realpolitik”—a term that defines the way that particular conceptions of the violated human body work to exclude the very bodies that perform violence in order to sustain the founding condition of an integrated

and mobility. The production compiled stories about 14 European nations, including non-EU countries such as Belarus and Turkey.

liberal body. Drawing on the example of *Trash Cuisine*, I examine how this production responds to human rights realpolitik by experimenting with a “dramaturgy of sensation” that attempts to undo the politics of identity, undoing the liberal conception of the body in favor of a political modality of dis-identification. *Trash Cuisine* works against the logics that stabilize the body and make it distinct from other bodies. This rendition of the human body opens toward an ethical consideration that political philosopher Erin Manning suggests is located in the possibility of the moving, sensing body to individuate in excess of stable identifications and solidified binaries between the Self/Other.

In the second half of the chapter, I analyze the limits of an ethical turn toward the sensation-based human body in human rights theatrical practice. While *Trash Cuisine* attempts to overcome the difference of political identity dictated by the nation-state, it also all too easily masks important questions of racial and linguistic difference. The production exists in a tension between two desires for universality in the field of human rights theatrical production: (1) universality as a call against depictions of the all-too-visible (read broken, defiled, naked etc.) human body that, while providing an avenue for international care, ensures the exclusion of certain bodies; (2) universality as a performance benefit that makes it possible to author a globally connected world by choosing to overcome specific differences while consequently choosing to ignore others. This universality is tied to the power of authorship. Its history in theatrical practice has long been criticized for the way that it assumes a decorporealized vantage point of authorship—i.e. that of the hegemonic white, European male—that need not be

accountable for the specificity of embodied experience.⁵⁸ The BFT's *Trash Cuisine* is an important addition to conversations about universality in human rights practice precisely because it arises from the first problem of universality. The company desires universality in reaction to being commanded to perform the particular/empirical body from the margins of Europe. Their position on the margin allows them to enter the stage to provide empirical knowledge of the little known country of Belarus while also restricting their access to universality as a performance benefit beyond identity. Because of this, I suggest the concept of dramaturgy of sensation is a way to address the strategic practice of universality dictated by, and responding to, modes of human rights production.

“Fuck Realpolitik” and *Trash Cuisine*

The Young Vic Theater is located on a trendy street called “The Cut” on the Southbank of London. It is across the bridge from St. Paul’s cathedral and a ten-minute walk from The Globe Theater, The Tate Modern Museum and Europe’s tallest Ferris wheel, the London Eye. On an early summer evening in 2013, I arrive at the theater to see a performance of the BFT’s *Trash Cuisine*, running from May 30th to June 15th. The performance is part of the summer festival series called LIFT, whose mission is to “bring global stories to London, transforming the city into a stage and celebrating the experiences of the many individuals, cultures and communities that call London their home” (liftfestival.com). The BFT seems a perfect fit for the performance of the global

⁵⁸ Postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak have persuasively argued that the notion of universality in relation to human rights has been used to extend colonialist and racist understandings of the civilized “man” and to exclude certain populations from the domain of the human (qtd. in Butler, 38). Universal human rights are a guise for a colonial project that extends Western values to others. In 1975, Chinua Achebe called to see the term universal banned from African literature because it was associated with the “narrow, self-serving, parochialism of Europe” (qtd. in Stanton). For other examples of this argument see Makua: 2002; and Bharucha; 2000.

city: they are a newly minted UK theater company that relocated to London from Belarus in 2011 after four members of the troupe were granted political asylum.

I pick up my ticket at the reception and head upstairs to the black-box theater called the “Maria”. The usher hands me a simple 2-page program and a postcard to sign. The postcard is part of the company’s activist campaign called Bring Bodies Back that was initiated in conjunction with the staging of BFT’s production *Trash Cuisine*. The postcard reads “Fuck RealPolitik” on one side and on the other side is a note asking for increased economic and political sanctions against Belarus addressed to the President of the European Parliament, Martin Shultz. The letters in “Fuck RealPolitik” are spelled out in images of naked human bodies and the writing on the back demands that the Belarusian administration return bodies of executed individuals to their families and abolish the death penalty in Belarus [Figure 1].

Later that evening, at a reception following the show, I see a placard that explains the stakes of realpolitik for the company alongside a photo exhibition of naked human bodies arranged to spell out realpolitik in a similar display as in the postcard [Figure 2]. The placard reads:

“REALPOLITIK is a type of politics based on practical objectives rather than on ideals. The word does not mean “real” in the English sense but rather connotes “things”—hence a politics of adaptation to things as they are. Realpolitik thus suggests a pragmatic, non-nonsense view and a disregard for ethical considerations. In diplomacy it is often associated with relentless, though realistic, pursuit of the national interest”.

The placard goes on to say that the Fuck RealPolitik campaign of the BFT was started on the 16th of September 2009 when the President of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, met with Alexander Lukashenko, the President of Belarus. This meeting was held on the same day as the 10th anniversary of the murder of two leaders of the Belarusian opposition, presumably by the Belarusian state. The meeting illuminated the hypocrisy of the European Union where international agreements and negotiations between nations take place with disregard for the human rights violations.⁵⁹

Both the Fuck RealPolitik campaign in 2009 and its later articulation as the Bring Bodies Back campaign in 2013 were a plea from the BFT for a new form of international diplomacy between the EU and other countries in Europe. This form of diplomacy would take into account the ethical consideration of violence inflicted by the state in regard to the human body. The Bring Bodies Back campaign called on the EU to put pressure on the Belarusian state in regard to bodily punishment and to return the bodies of those who had been killed or imprisoned. The case that inspired this campaign was that of the mother of Vladislav Kovalev, a young man who was charged with the metro bombing in Minsk, Belarus in 2011 and sentenced to capital punishment without public trial. In 2013, the mother of Kovalev was appealing to the EU's Court of Human Rights for ownership of her son's dead body, which was held by the Belarusian state.

The Bring Bodies Back campaign participated in a body politics that was vital for the re-building of nation-states after the fall of the Soviet Union. In her book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, Katherine Verdery describes how the body's corporeality

⁵⁹ Belarus is not a part of the European Union (as of 2016) but its neighboring Baltic country, Lithuania, has been part of the EU since 2004.

“localizes” a claim to a particular history through the advantage of its concreteness. The discovery of mass graves and the effort to restore previously disowned bodies of national heroes spurred countries, such as Belarus, into independence by providing justification in bodily form (Verdery 21). The BFT’s campaign participated in this tradition, but emerged as a claim to hold the Belarusian state accountable for its acts of punishment by articulating the rights of citizens in terms of their property of personhood. As such, the framing of *Trash Cuisine* vis-à-vis the Bring Bodies Back campaign made clear to the audience that the question of who owned the body, dead or alive, was at stake in the production. The BFT’s call for ethics, then, is to make visible those bodies that do not fit into the mold of proper national belonging and are violently disposed of, or “trashed”. The postcard and placard underscored that realpolitik relations between Belarus and other countries actually underwrites such violence by obscuring from sight bodies within nation-state. While the Bring Back Bodies campaign outlined concrete actions to secure the return of bodies, *Trash Cuisine* proposed a far more intricate critique of bodily ownership. The production rejected the way bodies are subsumed under the nation for “national interests” and grasped at a form of international diplomacy that imagined the body in a different way. But, if this were the case, what would such ethical bodies even look like? I keep this question in mind as I find a spot in the very first row of the auditorium to watch *Trash Cuisine*.

Trash Cuisine begins with a monologue from the French-British actor Philippe Spall who portrays a cooking show host, Pierre Noir, who narrates the rest of the show. Spall’s “Noir” has black stringy hair hanging over his face and looks like a sinister character from the culinary underworld. He welcomes the audiences at the Young Vic

and warms-up the crowd by purporting to know their tastes: “I know who you are – Young Vic! The hippest audience in town.” He announces, “tonight I’m going to take you on a cook’s tour of the globe. We’re going to be looking at some of the world’s great recipes and ingredients: beautiful beef from Argentina, fantastic fried fish dishes from the US. You’ll be meeting some of the people behind the recipes, some incredible chefs, seeing how the same dish can be done differently the world over, with flavors from Asia, and modern European twists to old favorites” (*Trash Cuisine*). Later in the monologue, Spall—who is getting dressed onstage in a suit and dress shoes—describes a Noir-style food adventure of smelly Limburger cheese in Sweden during which he pulls a sock from his pocket. From the sock he takes out a small dainty spoon and licks it with a popping sound at the end. Then he puts on the sock. The audience “ewws” in disgust at the effect produced between the spoon in Spall’s mouth and its prior location in a sock. The sock and the cheese become locked in a relationship that continues to build force in the production as actions between bodies and food recipes are organized in constellations that evoke disgust from the audience.

More “dishes” from different parts of the world follow on a stark and minimalistic set with a white rectangular wall and a white floor. Eight actors (five Belarusian actors and three “international” actors) perform scenes that depict forms of institutionalized violence across different times and places such as Rwanda’s genocide, the UK’s capital punishment cases in regard to the IRA resistance, Argentina’s “dirty war,” death row cases in US’s southern states, and a final vignette of the Belarusian capital punishment case of Vladislav Kovalev. In the scene immediately following Spall’s monologue, a stretcher is drawn onstage and covered with a tablecloth. On the stretcher are champagne

flutes and an arrangement of ruby red strawberries with cream. Two actresses playing state executioners (Stephanie Pan and Esther Mugambi) enjoy the dessert and discuss different cultural norms for executions in Thailand and Belarus. Points are made that in Thailand the bodies are returned back to families after execution per “tradition” and that in China execution is of the highest “world class” character (meaning efficient and abundant). During the dialogue a scene unfolds downstage of the table with the executioners. Two actors (Pavel Haradnitski and Viktoryia Biran) are positioned on a black tarp, stripped naked and “prepared” to be roasted. Their hands are tied behind their backs with rope and they are stuffed and decorated with apples and pineapples. In this juxtaposition, the epicurean delight of the two executioners indulging in strawberries and champagne is rendered unappetizing by the violent recipe of bodies prepared for roasting downstage.

Trash Cuisine foregrounds a tension between national delicacies and the bodies that are disposed of by the state. “Trash” in the production denotes a verb—the action of disposal—and also an adjective—the social status of those disposed of from the national body politic. The metaphor of trashing created between the body/food throughout the production has to do with a form of social cleanup. This point is viscerally evoked in a vignette about the Rwanda genocide that depicts the way the Rwandan state—influenced by ethnic classifications from Belgian colonization—called on the ethnic group of the Hutu to get rid of the Tutsi. In this scene, an actress (Esther Mugambi) recites a narrative from the perspective of a Tutsi woman whose husband, a Hutu, disposed of his own children because they were Tutsi. As Mugambi narrates, an actress (Nastassia Shcherbak) is stripped to her underwear and placed between two chairs in a plank position. She holds

this position throughout the scene, shaking from exertion as the scene progresses. Spall and another actor (Aleh Sidorchyk), portraying the Hutu husband, prepare a dish on a hot plate attached to a kitchen island behind the straining actress. The smell of meat searing on the grill fills up the auditorium. The seared food is brought out on a plate in front of the actress—and held out of her reach—as Mugambi continues to tell the story of how the children were cut up by their father. The effect is repulsive and stomach turning: the cooking meat becomes the flesh associated with the young children.

The production continues to move across state borders by pointing to the bodily excess, or ‘trash’, disposed of by nation-states. *Trash Cuisine* is a challenge to complacent eating and complacent watching where national dishes might be seen as part of touristic desire. In this culinary tour, objects of foreign delight are placed alongside a series of atrocities that rupture our everyday sensibilities. The scenes in the production are a combination of fictional scenarios (such as the conversation between the Thai and Belarusian state executioners) and activations of real testimonials collected from around the world by company members.

The food objects also serve as building blocks for more meditative and less aggressive relations between the actors. The last scene of *Trash Cuisine* features the story of Vlad Kovalev—the young man whose case is central to the Bring Bodies Back campaign. Similar to the way that the Rwandan scene was constructed, an English-speaking actor (this time Stephanie Pan) translates into English testimony from Kovalev’s mother as the rest of the cast materializes a physical score to the monologue. Toward the end of the scene the actors bring out large bowls of brightly colored vegetables—maroon beets, orange carrots, reddish-brown lentils etc.—and arrange them

on the ground as two bodies, ostensibly the sacrificed youth in the story, hang on the white wall in the background. The rest of the cast arranges the vegetables in overlapping circles in meditative and solemn fashion. The result is a sort of food memorial for the victims of state violence that also looks a lot like well-manicured flowerbeds in Minsk. Basic units of cut-up vegetables evoke the cultural-historical marker of national cuisine—the vegetables are curiously close to the way a Russian-style salad, a “vinaigrette,” would be assembled—but they are put into a different set of relations when they become material for memorialization. In this scene, food reconfigures the sensibility associated with the body politic, i.e. the proper bodies of the nation.

When sewn together, the scenes in *Trash Cuisine* do not deepen the context of any particular place but instead connect the different stories through motion and sensation. The domain of the senses is the site through which both food and human bodies are dislodged from national belonging. Artistically, *Trash Cuisine* moves food from object status to subject status, giving it an agency which acts upon the body. The body—as material formed through sensations of smell, sound, taste, and touch—exceeds forms of signification and identification associated with the nation-state. In the aforementioned scene about the Rwanda genocide, the smell of burning meat fills up the auditorium and the actress writhes in very real physical strain. The effect is not illustrative, but produced through the senses. In general, food and bodies in the piece are less symbolic in function and more sensorial. In the production there is an assault on the senses of audiences through the sting of spices being ground up, the smell of grilled flesh, and the sound of breaking chicken bones. In one excruciatingly loud sequence, actress Stephanie Pan mimes torture methods in a quirky stand-up routine that ends with an

impression of the electric chair. She uses a sound-looping machine that records her screams and layers the pitch of her voice to reach a level that nearly pierces the eardrums. The aggressive sound is a violent assault on the senses, although, importantly, not as a representation of a violent context or story, but as an action brought to bear on the body. The “dishes” created between food and body do not serve as historical-cultural makers of the nation-state, but instead are materials forced upon the body: food objects hit the actors, a spicy red pepper makes one of the actors cry onstage.

The capacity for food to rupture the realm of representation through sensation is most powerfully evoked in the very last sequence of the production. The actors take out large trash bags and bring wooden stools to the front of the stage, right in front of the first row. They then proceed to take out onions from inside the trash bags and chop them up on the stools with large knives to the music of a fast-paced mazurka. Each actor has a slightly different cutting style, but all chop in chaotic fashion for roughly three minutes. I sit in the front row and watch as onion after onion is executed. I also start to cry because the sweat (acid) of the onion irritates my eyes. I am moved, but the tears are not premised on identification with a sad story as a marker of empathy. What moves me is a form of sensorial and visceral contact between the onion and my own body. As such, *Trash Cuisine* in this ending sequence—and its conception throughout—presents a different relation of human rights representation and reception than that premised on an empathetic relation between the Self/Other. Instead, it critiques the very premise of a politics of identity that separates as it reifies the distinction between the Self/Other. It poses a vote of no confidence in a model of human rights representational practice that asks the audience empathize with violated (sensationalized) bodies from elsewhere.

Human Rights Realpolitik and the Sensational Body

Although the activist campaign Bring Bodies Back demands that certain actions be taken to hold the state of Belarus accountable for the human “trash” it produces, it is noteworthy that the global framework of *Trash Cuisine* extends past the context of human rights violations in Belarus. The production—especially in the sensorial critique of identification provided in the final onion sequence—is directed not against realpolitik as a form of international exchange between state governments, but, on the contrary, at precisely the reception of the trashed human bodies that the Bring Bodies Back campaign calls forward. In order to understand this uneasy relationship between the Bring Bodies Back campaign and *Trash Cuisine* it is important to understand the conditions of BFT’s exilic situation in London, England.

The day after I saw the production, the co-founders of the BFT, Nicolai Khalezin and Natalia Koliada, tell me during an interview that *Trash Cuisine* had received a one-star review from a newspaper called *City AM*, a tabloid-like newspaper, they say, but still widely read during morning commutes in London. Natalia mentions that the review ends with the line “now go away” and that it is “not quite racism, but that everywhere in the review it mentions ‘work on your Belarus’” (Personal Interview). The duo continues to describe what they see as the main hardship of working in the UK: being expected to perform only Belarusian subject matter. Nicolai adds, “UK theater can work on any topics, but for Belarusians: only their topics,” and Natalia expresses her concern that audiences in the UK do not let the company “touch” Shakespeare. Their critiques register the way that the BFT has become discursively incarcerated within the particularities of Belarus while the theaters at the center of Europe are free to appropriate any material

from around the globe. This identity has condemned them to perform the marginal position within the global city even as they are understandably hesitant to call their particular form of discrimination racism.

Indeed, what makes the BFT a “human rights theater” in the global cultural imaginaries created in festivals such as LIFT is their focus on the human bodies that are not extended protections and rights by the state. And yet, this focus on the human body provides that the BFT continues to be yoked and circumscribed by the limits of Belarus, specifically in relation to what stories they are able to author and perform. This spatial logic—which ties the BFT to the nation-state of Belarus even as it makes their theater a universal concern on the basis of the human body—is deeply engrained in the fibers of the international artistic sphere in which the BFT circulates. Aspects of what this means are traceable in other reviews of *Trash Cuisine*.

In general, the reviews of the production in the UK applauded the production’s theatrical imagination (Coveney) and sense of urgency in dealing with capital punishment. Many of the reviews picked up on the way that the production was an “assault on every one of our senses” (Brantley) and that the “sensuous theatricality” of the production was able to “stir our consciousness” about the state of world affairs, in particular the murder, decapitation, and general violence inflicted by state institutions on civilians (Billington). In the reviews, however, there also emerged a common line of critique: the production’s watered-down effect. This critique referred to the production’s expanded view of violence outside of Belarus and the inclusion of stories of atrocities from the last 40 years from places such as Argentina, Thailand, and the UK. In a review from *Time Out London*, the problem was that the choice of these sites—everything from

the Rwandan genocide to the electric chair execution in the US—was deemed “arbitrary” and had “no clear message beyond offering an incomplete reflection of humanity at its worst” (Lukowski). In *Time Out London*, as in others, a call for a “spot more dramaturgy” was ordered. Similarly, Ben Brantley of the *New York Times*—while a supporter of the company and generally admired the production when he saw it in London—noted that the show “overloads its plate and dilutes its potential strength”.

The verdict that the production’s global culinary tour lacked focus in its execution was often pitched as a “dramaturgical” problem. As an issue of theatrical craft, the failure of the production was that its message could not be sustained or deepened across different contexts. The concern was that the more general focus on violence in *Trash Cuisine* ran the risk of not paying enough attention to the specificity of historical and political conditions in which distinct cases of violence arose. By generalizing beyond the particular, the production’s message could not yield any nuanced insights about violence other than the general problem of human cruelty.

However, this point about dramaturgy also carried with it something else: a sentiment that prior BFT productions—those that dealt with the specifics of Belarus such as their previous production *Minsk 2011*—avoided the dramaturgical problem because they stayed within the borders of the Belarusian context. This point was perhaps most evident in a review from *The Evening Standard* on June 6 2013. It read: “The grisly, fascinating specifics of their little-known homeland have always been one of the BFT’s strongest suits but here they wander aimlessly from Northern Ireland to Rwanda before only belatedly going home”. The review’s pairing of “fascinating” specifics of Belarus in prior work and the “aimless wandering” in *Trash Cuisine* draw attention to how

dramaturgical critiques leveled at the BFT's newest production treaded dangerously close to expressing a desire for the exotic, little-known context of Belarus and worked to confine the company within the particular of the Belarusian nation-state.

When, in the press, *Trash Cuisine* was praised for its global move that transcended the border of the nation-state, this was seen as positive because it was “inclusive”. It featured performers from multiple countries and multiple national incidents of violence that showed that “the human resolve to torture another human is disappointingly universal, and seemingly almost as easy as the desire to taste exotic fare from other cultures” (Olmos). The reviewers that celebrated inclusive universality applauded the production for the way that it extrapolated from different places/times a general situation.

Although taking different sides, both sets of reviewers understood *Trash Cuisine* through the prism of identification with a singular nation-state context. One called for more attention to a particular historical and political context while the other announced that the particular should be included in the world map of violence. Together, these two positions underscore the paradox of the universal/particular in human rights practice for the BFT: the company's identity as an oppositional Belarusian theater company allows for the company to make human rights claims and to mobilize international resources. They are added to the inclusive world map of human rights precisely because of their particular national identity. Yet, this also forms a structure of belonging through identification with the nation-state that limits the possibility of the BFT to perform other kinds of stories. The identity traps them in one particular story: the sensational depiction of those bodies that are violated and trashed by the Belarusian state. Unlike the

ownership of the body by the state that the BFT exposes in their Bring Bodies Back campaign, the paradox of universal/particular points to an ownership of the body that happens through a production of the “human body” in human rights exchanges.

Legal and political theorists of human rights have shown that liberalism scripts a specific kind of human body that serves as the baseline condition for acknowledging a rights-bearing subject. In order to be ascribed dignity and rights, the liberal body must abide by the mandate of corporeal integrity, which refers to a body that has three guiding characteristics: it is inviolable, autonomous, and self-enclosed (Anker 19). While these pre-conditions of the body create parameters that place importance on the individual in liberal discourse, feminist scholars of human rights have highlighted how the integrated body also makes it possible to imagine bodies as equal and interchangeable units. This integrated body secures a one-to-one relationship between the individual body and the larger national body politic that obfuscates factors that differentiate people within a population (see Anker and Mooney).⁶⁰ As such, what is posited as a body in liberalism is a dangerously purified notion of the body: one that makes little space for the acknowledgement of embodied experience and the body’s vulnerabilities and sensibilities.⁶¹

However, while the body is integrated into the national body politic on the premise of corporeal integrity, human rights representational practices are concerned with those bodies that have been excluded in one way or another from the national body politic. This human body is *not* an integrated rights-bearing body. What tends to show up

⁶⁰ See for example feminist legal scholarship such as Mooney: 2014.

⁶¹ Cultural theorist Elizabeth Anker calls this liberalism’s “contempt” for the body and legal scholar Annabelle Mooney calls this de-corporealized notion the “body hidden from sight” in her analysis of human rights law. See Anker 4; and Mooney 3-6.

as the human body in human rights theatrical practice, then, is the representation of the *negative* condition of human rights (i.e. the human whose rights have been violated or taken away from them in one form or another) rather than a *positive* condition of rights (i.e. the human who has human rights).⁶² And one need only look to the late 20th century tradition of constructing Holocaust memorials to see how the aesthetic choice to represent human rights violations happens through bodies depicted in this negative condition: naked, mutilated, broken, deformed and/or defiled. What these negative depictions represent and mourn is the loss and erasure of the inviolable, autonomous, and self-enclosed body.⁶³

A particular logic of the body emerges in the relationship between the (positive) inviolable rights-bearing body and the representation of the (negative) naked body without rights. They are two sides of the same coin. The threat of bodies being violated is what is required for the legibility of the rights-bearing body. The naked, broken, deformed and/or defiled body is precisely the aesthetic protocol of corporeal unmaking that vindicates the ideal body that must be restored and recovered to wholeness (Anker 4). For instance, it is noticeable in the field of theater practice that the testimonial form in liberal human rights theater tends to privilege the personalized voice. Even where the text

⁶² Paul Rae makes this point in his book *Theater and Human Rights*. Rae remarks that theatrical practices used to address the subject of human rights tend to focus less on human rights per se than on their abuse. He writes, “in part, this underscores the progressive role of theater-makers in wider traditions of civil activism. But it also suggests that there is something rather *untheatrical* about the nature of human rights: simply stated, one does not do them in the same way as one violates them” (Rae 13).

⁶³ This politics of representing liberal human rights is often linked to the philosophy of Hannah Arendt—the widely cited doyenne of European political philosophy in the 20th century. Arendt’s classical texts on human rights concern themselves with stateless populations whose lack of rights, and exclusion from the national body, reduce them to “abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human” (qtd. in Anker 27). This “abstract nakedness” and “nothing but human” evokes a negative condition of the body in order to pose it as a problem. The body is naked because it exists outside the systems and structures that bestow rights. A depiction of abstract nakedness is therefore not so much “bodily” as a representation of the lack of a positive situation of a rights-bearing individual.

is composite and the narrator unnamed, it speaks of and to the individual, whose self-actualization remains the most important step towards redressing the wrongs (Rae, 17). What is underwritten is a liberal model of the self-contained individual whose fractured self must be put back together from a state of psychic injury, a narrative that nicely lines up with trauma studies' focus on narration/testimony.

Whereas the ideal, integrated body is decorporealized and made to disappear from the sphere of politics by being absorbed in a one-to-one relation with the state, the violated body is made visible as human but only in a sensationalized form as physically and mentally dismembered. The sensational body is acknowledged to the extent that it serves a narrative purpose that re-affirms the solidity of the nation-state's borders and boundaries. Therefore, human rights discourses and norms consolidate a symbolic economy of bodies in relation to the nation-state by marking bodies as either corporeally pure and integrated within the political system or inversely *too* bodily and excluded from the system (i.e. the positive/negative dynamic of human rights representation). Importantly, those bodies kept out of the political system are yoked to a sensationalization of the body that evokes the body as the limit for political participation.⁶⁴ What initially presents itself as care for the human body is an aesthetic protocol that licenses and perpetuates forms of dispossession through recourse to a sensationalized body. Although the liberal trope of representation promises the restoration of the violated body to the body politic, the logic of the human body underpinning the ideal rights-bearing subject maintains that certain bodies have *too* much body and cannot be integrated and de-corporealized.

⁶⁴ For example, bodily exclusion could confine women to the body and equally over-determine bodies as excessive through racial images of carnality and medicalized discourses of disease and infection.

The reviews of *Trash Cuisine* point to the way that the BFT is required to exclusively appeal to the particulars of Belarusian political opposition. The company cannot escape their sensationalized bodies and are not afforded a purified and decorporealized body that can disappear into the sphere of global production. They must reproduce the liberal trope of the disintegrated body in relation to the nation-state while likewise never being provided integration into the global space precisely because they are *too* bodily, in the sense of too particularly Belarusian, to perform universality.

The representation of an overexposed body, I maintain, is a form of human rights realpolitik that produces a “human body” as a product for securing national interests. Realpolitik is an international form of relations that disregards the vulnerability of bodies within the nation-state in favor of national interests in political and economic exchange. As a pragmatic economic relation it pays no attention to ethical concerns. Thus, I add, it works through the imaginary of a stable decorporealized body politic that subsumes all bodies in a one-to-one relation with the nation-state, and in the process makes the body invisible in order to secure international exchange. On the other hand, human rights realpolitik, I would argue, produces an interest in the body as a consideration of the non-normative bodies disposed of by state governments. The negatively constructed human body is thus equally yoked to the nation-state and become the basis for of political and economic forms of exchange. One need only to look at the history of human rights diplomacy since the Helsinki Accords of the 1970s to see the way that the violated body has served to win or lose trade agreements between nations.⁶⁵ In the current political European climate, one of the main barriers to entry for nations to the EU is determined by

⁶⁵ See “human rights internationalism” in Moyn, “The Future of Human Rights”.

the country's human rights record and exclusion is policed on the basis of violated bodies. An example of this is cited in Gayatri Spivak's work on development when she comments that the (human rights) concern for women's rights often secures, and paves the way, for economic development in non-Western countries.⁶⁶ Human rights realpolitik works through a gendered and racialized overexposure of dis-integrated body that claims universality because it is located outside the structures of national political inclusion. But, because this body is reductively constructed only as a negative image of rights within the nation it becomes the very tool through which global geopolitics secures international space on the basis of a common imaginary good.

Without arguing with the reviewers of *Trash Cuisine* about whether or not the production was indeed dramaturgically sound or compelling enough, I suggest that the production's "wandering" around the world was not adequately understood by the reviewers. The perceived failure of the show—a watered-down message and too little focus on Belarus—was precisely the opening that the BFT provided in order to respond to a particular kind of sensational fatigue: the company's fatigue with being made into products enclosed within a border of Belarus and forced to speak only to the particularity of their political repression and opposition. In the next section, I trace where a dramaturgy of the sensation might break at the inclusion/exclusion dynamic of identity that had catapulted the BFT to international fame and also mobilized a particular form of discrimination against the company.

⁶⁶ See Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education* 279.

The Dramaturgy of Sensation

Rather than treating dramaturgy as an evaluative tool premised on a standard of right and wrong ways to create theater, I propose that the BFT offered a dramaturgy in the “sensuous theatricality” (Billington) in response to the core logics of the normative liberal body both as a positive rights-bearing body and as its negative of the sensationalized body. Both formulations, as foils of one another, script and anticipate a stable and consolidated body in spatial relation to the nation-state. *Trash Cuisine* provides an alternative form of dramaturgy by foregrounding sensation rather than sensationalism as an aesthetic strategy.

I draw on the distinction between sensational/ism and sensation from the writing of Gilles Deleuze in his book *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*. In his study of the Irish painter, Deleuze analyzes the use of color in Bacon’s painting to conclude that there is a distinction to be made between painting in the representational model—that accentuates an object of recognition that fits into a story and narrative—and painting in the sensation-based model—that accentuates tonalities, intensities and vibrancies that move underneath the surface of objects that are codified and known. Bacon’s sensation-based style captures the feeling of something rather than its form and Deleuze writes that this feeling does not resemble an emotion as much as an energy that runs through the nervous system. Deleuze’s theorization of sensation in this book, coupled with his notion of the “nomad” in earlier work, provide a framework for highlighting the movement of experience that is difficult to constrain and measure because it resists, and cannot be grasped in, a structure or organized form. As a political project, Deleuze theorizes a sense of difference that, in the movement of sensation, resists the stability and fixity of identity positions that are

always representations that limit an object. In the quote that opens this chapter, Deleuze imagines violence in terms of sensation rather than the fixed structures that give way to sensational representation. Violence and cruelty are not objects of knowledge that relate to an institutional form of violence, i.e. a representation of a rights-less body that has suffered that fate of state-enforced violence. Instead, violence and cruelty will be linked to forces that act on the body and between bodies as a consideration of the body's fleshiness, which amounts to the body's sensibilities and vulnerabilities. The fleshiness that Deleuze promotes is a move against the norms that guide recognition.⁶⁷

The BFT is sensationalized as a specific form of enclosure of human rights representation that features a violated body at the heart of its representational politics. The enclosure is a form or narrative that assigns the body of the BFT to a fixed location. In other words, the sensational body is one that does not get to move. Therefore, it is then precisely the movement of the body in *Trash Cuisine* that announces something important about the body. In distinction to the negative representation of the human body in liberal theory where the body is stripped of an identity in relation to the nation-state (but nonetheless is positioned within the spatial logic of the nation-state), the movement of bodies in the production of *Trash Cuisine* proposes to move bodies against the compartmentalized logics of the nation-state. This point is what was missed by the

⁶⁷ Since the 2000s, there has been an “aesthetic turn” in both cultural studies and in international relations. The “aesthetic turn” core belief revolves around the limits of identity-based politics and sees aesthetics as important ground for exploration. In addition to Deleuze, Jacques Rancière is frequently drawn on as key theorists to substantiate aspects of the turn. Deleuze and Rancière provide different ways to approach aesthetics in relationship to the logics of recognition: one, Deleuze, focusing more so on the limits of optically-oriented recognition and seeing sensation as providing a modality of thought that ruptures the representation paradigm. The other, Rancière, is interested in the historically grounded analysis of the distribution of sensible that makes a material object worthy of recognition. Rancière engages with the norms of representation and critiques that recognition is attained once there is a consensus on what sensible material will “count”. This count, Rancière writes, is fundamentally premised on a distribution of the political act that precedes the work of representation. See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 13.

reviewers of *Trash Cuisine*. The violence in the production was less about a historically situated and contextualized form of institutional or state-enforced violence, but instead drew on violence as movement of sensation, of pain or a strain. As such, the BFT's focus on sensation did not intend to include various nation-states and historical periods in a larger picture or map of violence, but thought of violence as a way of dislodging from the solidity of identity positions.

Take an example from *Trash Cuisine* in 2013 from my fieldnotes:

A slow dance starts center stage between Pavel and Esther while four actors in black masks pass Chestnuts back and forth under their feet. Music plays (Latin?). I am not sure what kind of dance at first but realize that it must be the Argentine Tango because a monologue follows about the "Dirty War" in Argentina. As Pavel (a Belarusian, white male actor) and Esther (a black English actress) dance the chestnuts at times disturb their dance and the music stops. A dancing minefield I think. After the few chestnut pauses, Pavel kicks the chestnuts away and the dance resumes. A voice recording recites a monologue about being wrongly accused of a crime. Above, on the white screen is a projection that references the words "Dirty War" which I link to Argentina. Then, a microphone is brought in from offstage. Pavel moves toward the microphone as if to speak but the microphone is pulled away from him. The next thing I remember is that Pavel's body "dies" by going limp and Esther continues to slow dance with a limp body in her hands.

This scene evokes a powerful national imaginary of Argentina. It does so through the dual identity markers of “Dirty War” and “tango”. The scene features two actors who are neither from Argentina nor from the same place. Pavel is a Belarusian white male and Esther is a UK black woman. The tango is visibly not danced in what could be thought of as the proper way. We could say that this tango is a multi-national and multi-racial dance: the scene in which this tango is danced includes chestnuts/bullets/mines rolling on the ground and the “killing” of Pavel prior to his testifying at the microphone. Thus, it is concerned with the people who are in excess of the national body politic even though the dance that is being danced is the quintessentially national cultural practice of Argentina. The last sequence of the scene, with the limp dancing body, also suggests that the tango might continue even if the partner is a dead body. The tango scene in *Trash Cuisine* brings to the foreground the moving body in relation to questions of identity, bodily ownership, and belonging.

Building on the role of movement in the work of Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben,⁶⁸ Erin Manning’s book *The Politics of Touch* evokes tango as a way to conceptualize a politics that resists the inclusion/exclusion relationship of the state. Manning’s work is most intriguing when she concerns herself with the way that the state manages bodies through the organization of identity. Tango is a conceptual frame from

⁶⁸ In his “Notes on Gesture,” Agamben defines gesture as the movement of communication. He refers to gestures in a communication medium that can be linguistic and/or physical. Gesture is the opening up of the medium rather than the end of communication as meaning. The focus on movement in gesture relates not to a system of production (which has an end in sight) nor to action (which is an end to itself), but to revealing the medium through which a production of meaning occurs. For Agamben, “what characterizes gesture is that nothing is being produced or acted but something is being endured and supported (Agamben, “Notes on Gesture” 56.7). Whereas both Agamben and Deleuze would suggest that in movement lies the possibility of undoing the normative shapes and structures of an object of recognition, they do so in two different ways. Deleuze is oriented toward the experience that comes from movement and how it serves as site for a difference that cannot be organized into a shape. Agamben’s gesture is the medium or glue that holds communication together and exposes what sustains or props up meaning.

which to understand the way identity is dislodged from the position the state secures for the body. She writes:

“Tango as a political gesture is the exhibition of the between: between my interpretation and your creation, between my lead and your response. Tango allows mediality of experience to shine through, exposing the ethical dimension in the relation, celebrating the sphere of that which cannot be known. Of course not all tango appreciates this challenge. Politics is never simple or straightforward. At its most common, tango replays the drudgery of the defined roles of self and other, relishing the segregation of sameness. But even then, tango demands a response, a response that can never be accurately predicted...it is not a dance of cities or countries, but the dance of the ghetto, of the space that cannot be accurately named or defined.” (Manning, 17)

The gesture of the tango pulls apart the stability of identities and positions within a nation-state and between nation-states because it is relational and meditational. We can detect the value that Manning finds in Agamben’s notion of gesture as mediality and Deleuze’s focus on the experience of sensation of a touch that breaks at the politics of recognition. In her study, Manning emphasizes movement for the purposes of specifically understanding the politics of recognition as it constructs insider and outsider positions attached to the nation-state. Broadly speaking, she focuses on the movement “between” bodies to highlight and undo the stability of positions that assign a place for the Self and the Other. Sensation, for Manning, is thus a politics of a moving body that “reaches out”

across such identity position of Self/Other. The sentient body does not belong in a time/space of the nation-state as much as its movement with other bodies creates its own time and space.

Trash Cuisine works with a dramaturgy of sensation that poses a major question: how might bodies in motion provide another understanding of political relations than the one dictated by the state and its organization of identity? When we regard the tango of Pavel and Esther we see that this is not the Argentine tango of the body politic but also one that concerns itself with the excess of the stable body. This is two-fold: first, the bodies of Pavel and Esther exceed the marker of Argentina. Their bodies do not represent Argentina and they do not even pretend to dance the tango “well”. The tango is trans-national. Second, it is danced across the divide of the living and the dead. It is trans-temporal. This has to do with the notion that sensation, as a relational and embodied form between bodies, also instantiates times/spaces that rupture the neat humanistic divide between the spaces assigned to the living and those to the dead.⁶⁹

There is enough evidence to suggest that the tango scene was not intended to provide knowledge of Argentina but to wrench it from a national identity. Specifically, the writing of the nation-state onstage was important only to the extent that it presented a façade that covered up the performance that mattered most: the dancing, sensing bodies being exterminated by the state. Ester and Pavel remind us about the bodies and not about Argentina. Yet, unlike the naked images of bodies that circulate as products of human rights realpolitik, the body in *Trash Cuisine* is a moving body articulating a

⁶⁹ The classic liberal theory of Hannah Arendt’s “abstract nakedness” is predicated on a living human that is stripped of rights and also, in general, anthropocentric in that it is the human rather than in relation to other living and non-living things. This second point about the dead body highlights a point about sensation that is not addressed in much detail in either Anker or Manning.

disidentification with the politics of identity that creates stable places for bodies. The sensorial body, then, becomes the site of the human rights claim, which constitutes an ethical imperative to think and act trans-nationally and trans-temporally in the face of identity-based politics that solidify a body and position it in relationship to the nation-state. Against an inclusive notion of universality, *Trash Cuisine* is precisely the call toward something that moves in excess not of the nation-state per se, but even further, in excess of the politics of identity premised on a stable and integrated individual in liberal theory. The sensorial body then disputes not just the inclusion/exclusion dynamic of identifiable bodies within the nation-state as described by Manning, but also the production of a human body in human rights realpolitik that conditions a form of international diplomacy likewise based on an integrated and stable body. *Trash Cuisine* invites us to extend (and re-consider) sensorial bodies in light of issues not just within the nation-state but also in the international sphere.

Universality from the Margins? Or The Limits of Authoring Sensation

Over the last fifteen years there has been an influx of academic work recognizing the need to think a “critical universality” to understand the ideals and practices that propel individuals and groups past the confines of an identity-based politics with its binaries of the global/local and self/other (Stanton).⁷⁰ Overall, the use of the term universal in its

⁷⁰ Rethinking the “universal” has been a part of recent conversations for poststructuralist scholars in addition to postcolonial scholars (both camps would not have touched the word less than twenty years ago). Judith Butler takes up the topic of universality from the perspective of poststructuralist thought. In her essay “Re-Staging the Universal”, she writes about the fear that poststructuralist accounts of universality “fail to offer a strong substantive or procedural account of what is common to all citizen-subjects within the domain of political representation” (14). One of the concerns in Butler’s work is how to think past the limit of political representation on the basis of identity and identification *without* calling for a simple positivist notion of universality that determines which politically relevant features of human beings might be

“new” and “crucial” construction remains a hotly debated and unsettled issue and in this section I depart in my discussion of universality from a question raised by Judith Butler: what happens when a disenfranchised group proceeds to claim “universality”, to claim that they ought properly to be included within its purview (38)? For the BFT the call to universality arises from the costs they experience (both artistically and also as an issue of discrimination) by being excluded from mainstream global cultural production for the reason that they are over-identified with the particular/empirical body.

After Natalia and Nicolai describe to me their anger with the *City AM* review and the anti-immigration sentiments that it fueled, I asked them another question: Why did they choose to stage global stories and how did they imagine they relate to places such as Rwanda and Argentina? Natalia answered me by describing a phone call she had that morning with a theater troupe from Palestine that was interested in knowing more about how the BFT achieved international visibility for their political struggle. She ends the anecdote by saying: “In our situation it is simple: we are the same as they are” (Personal Interview). What she means is that both the Palestinian theater company and the BFT are looking for visibility in the international arena to draw attention to their political struggle. Therefore, the “sameness” that she refers to underscores an imaginary link between Belarus and Palestine that is essentially political in character and authorized by the BFT’s credentials to stage global political stories because they too participate in a fight against a political regime. The call to “sameness” in this case is intended to allow for a global connectivity that does not marginalize the BFT as a theater that only provides the

extended to all human beings, i.e. a normative view of a political order. See Butler, “Re-Staging the Universal” 14.

empirical content for global human rights (or authenticity). This makes for a different position of authorship than when the margin addresses a cosmopolitan audience. This different position on the margin, is also what makes for an alliance of “sameness” between the BFT and the Palestinian company.

However, if the dramaturgy of sensation promises to avoid “sameness” as an identarian foundation, how do we read the fact that sensation in *Trash Cuisine* is also a technique of crafting performance that does yield a representation? Manning issues a warning that all too often the tango reproduces the Self/Other divide—that is the stability of identity positions.⁷¹ She calls this the “segregation of sameness” (Manning, 17). And unfortunately, although the production revolved around a “sameness” that connected the BFT to an oppositional theater in Palestine, the call of sameness masked forms of bodily signification and meaning not reducible to political opposition in *Trash Cuisine*. This becomes very evident as the technique of sensation becomes staged and presented to audiences in *Trash Cuisine*.

There are some issues in the staging of sensation in *Trash Cuisine* as “sameness”. First, in foregrounding political violence, one of the social relations never engaged in the production is that of racial difference as Pavel and Esther dance onstage. The production stages a post-racial imaginary. The cosmopolitan audiences that watch the play never

⁷¹ Whereas the poorly danced tango between Pavel and Esther might not matter so much to Manning, I think that dance scholar Marta Savigliano would pay close attention to how the form is executed. Savigliano’s book *Tango: The Political Economy of Passion* is a historically grounded account of how the tango was carried across national borders and how the form responded to political and economic pressures. The moving body in Savigliano’s analysis is implicated within specific relationships that are guided by “passion”. Savigliano points to the way that dancing is a locus of passionate exchanges that resemble colonized/colonizer relations of power – i.e. what draws the European white male to the underworld of Argentina’s dance clubs is the “irrational”, “passionate” and “exotic” nature of the dance and dancers with whom he dances. Savigliano argues that affect is not at all innocent but part and parcel of economic and political mechanisms of creating identities. See Savigliano: 1995.

need to confront bodily relations of identity not about political oppression and state-violence. The production renders other forms of cultural-historical specificity unimportant in favor of acknowledging political difference in government structures. Second, the theater of cruelty that was performed in vignettes of violence from around the world fell into the trap creating a scale of brutal acts from one place to another that might also measure oppressions in different contexts. Certain brutal acts seemed more or less violent depending on the country. Thirdly, and importantly for the BFT itself, by ethically being beyond the linguistic terrain of “testimonial” (that provides that authenticity of experience that the BFT are avoiding) what becomes quite noticeable throughout *Trash Cuisine* is that the bodies that speak onstage are those of non-Belarusian actors for whom English is a native language. The Belarusian actors are actually rendered mute. This last issue jeopardizes part of the BFT’s political work even as it tries to undo the problem of identity. Although trying to avoid the marginalization of the Belarusian body, their actual history of marginality—i.e. evidenced by access to English—came into full view and could not be escaped. In these three ways the technique and representational strategy of sensation fell short of its promise as a critical universality because it produced “sameness” as a tool for segregation.

Interestingly, in 2015, when the BFT presented *Trash Cuisine* in New York at the La Mama Theater, there emerged a debate about the very issues I have just outlined. Most notably, for someone who had seen the production in 2013, the opening sequence was modified. In 2015, *Trash Cuisine* began with a number where the actors come onto the empty stage, one by one with wooden stools in their hands, and announce their name and national origins. The stools are placed onstage in roughly the same position as in the

ending number of the production, where the actors cut up onions with large knives in front of the audience. The opening/closing numbers create bookends for *Trash Cuisine*. Although the press did not mention this change in the production from its 2013 to its 2015 iteration, it was a striking development in the context of the production's focus on sensation as a technique through which to forge a universal connectivity between various times and places. Why, then, add more identification to the production with this opening sequence?

After attending the production at the La Mama Theater, I had a chance to speak to a few of the Belarusian actors about the choice that was made. I was told that the directors made the decision to add this sequence. Also, there was some debate among the actors about its function in the dramaturgy of *Trash Cuisine*. One actor supported the addition of this sequence for the reason that it addressed some of the problems apparent in the previous production. He suggested that without making clear that there were Belarusian and non-Belarusian actors (and also non-Belarusian actors who were from different places) the production masked the politics of the production itself. The actors did arrive on stage from different places and this was important to note. To go along with this point, I noticed that in the final production of *Trash Cuisine* co-director Natalia Koliada repeated a familiar BFT story. She told the audience that two of the actresses on stage, Stephanie Pan and Esther Mugambi, had flown to Belarus for rehearsal and were detained at the airport and not allowed into the country. The story served to highlight the barriers to entry and exit that exist between countries, particularly between the EU and Belarus. Indeed, in the sensational narrative of the BFT, stories pertaining to the legal and physical hardship of travel are abundant from the perspective of the Belarusian actors and

their travel to the UK. As such, is not an “entrance” onto the stage always conditioned by the macro-politics of entering and exiting a socio-political structure? The addition of the opening sequence with an announcement of names and national origins might then be taken as a way of combating some of the blind spots of the production that generally did not acknowledge the bodies of the actors themselves. And, it was noticeable that the addition of the opening sequence provided the only moment in the production where the Belarusian actors could speak for themselves, even if it was just one sentence in English.

On the other hand, other actors seemed unsatisfied with the addition of the opening sequence in 2015. One actor was concerned that the identification-based protocol of a name and national origins reproduced the same nation-state paradigm that the production seemed to want to subvert. What would a focus on the individual location or national identity of the actors accomplish? Certainly, there is an argument here about the way that this opening sequence works within a politics of national segregation would announce the very structures of realpolitik that create inclusions/exclusions based on identity. Was not the point of *Trash Cuisine* to open up a different perspective of humanity based on sensation rather than reproduce the same social structure? And, of course, what does the particular solution of name/national identity highlight if *other* forms of difference already mentioned, notably those of race and gender, would not be mentioned?

The debate about the addition of the opening sequence did not have a definitive answer, but it did announce to me that the BFT was considering the limits and possibilities of sensation as a devising tool as they encountered new conditions from 2013 to 2015. Their strategies for making claims for universality were always already

dictated by the conditions of human rights production in which they were embedded. The story of *Trash Cuisine* rather than the stories in *Trash Cuisine* was the more proper site of the dramaturgy of sensation. The dramaturgy of sensation was the movement of *Trash Cuisine* in an ongoing relation with the human rights machinery that demanded of the BFT a call for universality from the margin.

Conclusion

In a post-Cold War era, it is more pressing than ever to address the question of strategic universalism. Although identity continues to mobilize forms of human rights struggles,⁷² the field of human rights theatrical practice has actually seen a proliferation of sensation-based productions such as *Trash Cuisine* that foreground non-identitarian notions of connectivity and contemplation.⁷³ These productions call on an ethical mode of connectivity and common ground through sensation rather than suffer the separations of identity. Unfortunately, this shift toward a post-identitarian universality is rarely examined as a practice that emerges within the gendered and racialized dynamics of global production. In this chapter, I argued that the “dramaturgy of sensation” in *Trash Cuisine* arises from a historical need for the BFT to avoid identity-based enclosures that plague human rights theater production. Sensation sought to dislodge the currency of the

⁷² Identity serves as a motor through which groups gain access to rights within human rights legal and political discourses. Sociologist Yasmin Soysal has argued that the site of rights has increasingly been recast as the person or individual since the post-war era. But she does this on the basis of arguing that while the source and legitimacy of rights becomes more universal and inclusive, the person, paradoxically, becomes more and more particularistic through identity: “The discourse about identities creates ever increasing claims about cultural distinctiveness and group rights” (1-15). The embedded concern in Soysal’s paradox is that while identity-based rights create new group solidarities and mobilizing resources, the solidity of identity also serves as the basis for exclusionary policies. She brings up increasingly resistive immigration policies in Europe as an example.

⁷³ For an example see May, “Meditations of the Pain of Others” 10. May argues that “presence” and “empathy” are affective conduits for creating shared democratic space beyond hostile rhetoric.

violated particular body that is trafficked in international cultural relations I called human rights realpolitik. And yet, a danger of a “dramaturgy of sensation” arises when it solidifies as a performance genre of human rights representation. The bodies of those who author a “dramaturgy of sensation” as a representational strategy is critical in locating the political effectiveness of sensation or else it risks becoming a strategy of flattening-out difference by those at the center of the operation. Although, as this chapter traces, there was a political reason for the BFT to embrace a sensation-based framework in *Trash Cuisine*, it was also universality from *their* margin that was afforded the opportunity for representation.⁷⁴ Indeed the human rights mechanism risks extracting from a company such as the BFT a “dramaturgy of sensation” and mobilizing it as a new ethical performance trope available for all beyond the historical conditions of authorship.

⁷⁴ I have written elsewhere in this dissertation about how championing of the BFT as the quintessential refugee human rights theater is possible because they provide a perfect refractive surface through which white liberal audiences in the US/UK can trespass to universality without having to encounter the dangers of racial divides and colonial histories in the US and UK. I call this the “perfect other” role that the BFT takes on in the human rights mechanism.

FIGURES

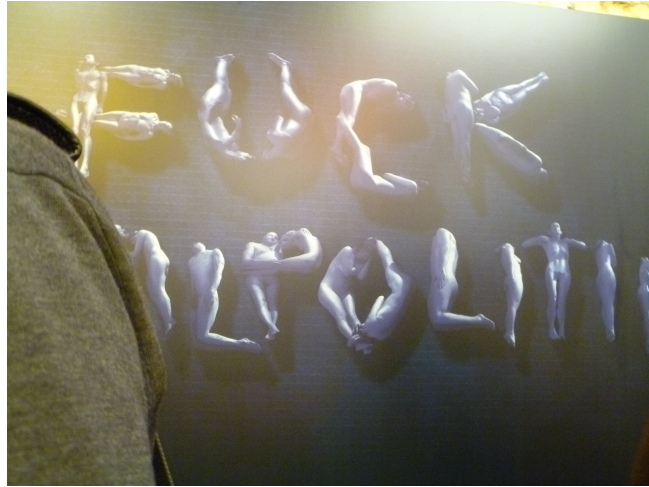


Figure 1: Postcard Fuck Realpolitik Campaign



Figure 2: Image from Bring Bodies Back Photo Shoot

CONCLUSION

DECOLONIZING HUMAN RIGHTS THEATER

In 2012, one year into my dissertation research, I attend a public talk hosted by the Political Science colloquium at the University of Minnesota with Belarusian ex-presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov. Sannikov had run for presidential office in 2010 against president Alexander Lukashenko. A former diplomat, he was the co-founder of a Belarusian pro-European website, *Charter '79*, and popular among many members of the urban intelligentsia in Minsk. He had also publically voiced support for the BFT. After his talk, I approach Sannikov to ask him more about his relationship with the BFT. During our short exchange, Sannikov manages to correct the way that I refer to the BFT. He objects to my description of them as a “political theater”. He understands their work differently, saying, “they are not a political theater, but a human rights theater”.

Sannikov’s correction marked a turning point in my research about the BFT. “Political theater” and “human rights theater” were both qualifiers for the BFT that were most often treated in the press and in scholarship as synonyms or interchangeable terms based on semantic differences in popular usage. The resolve in Sannikov’s comment rejected the easy interchangeability between the values of “political theater” and “human

rights theater”. He purposely re-positioned the theater company as a human rights theater to distinguish the work from political theater. There was something *wrong* about my describing the company as “political”. This error made me realize that the stakes of the BFT’s metamorphosis into a world-renown theater on the global stage concerned precisely this anti-political effect. After this brief encounter, I found it impossible to gloss over the distinction between political theater and human rights theater. I became hyper-attuned to the relations around the way these terms were mobilized in contemporary theater discourses. My research was bound to this inquiry. The subject of this dissertation was the investigation of how, why and for whom the BFT became a human rights theater since they began to tour abroad in Western Europe and the US in 2008.

In my five years of fieldwork with the company, I discovered that the BFT’s transformation into a human rights theater happened under specific material conditions that were the result of two intertwined problems with political theater. These problems arose at a historical juncture that had different effects for artists working in Belarus and international audiences at the liberal centers of London and New York. The first problem concerned the demands of international audiences in what historian Samuel Moyn refers to as a post-historical climate in Western Europe and the US. It became untenable to promote the company as a political theater once the BFT began to perform outside of Belarus. “Political theater” aligned the company with a political party or position in opposition to the regime of Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko. Directly supporting regime change produced anxiety for Western liberal audiences at a historical juncture conditioned by an international relations framework of human rights. In 2011, Oskar Eustis of The Public Theater in New York City disassociated the BFT from

political theater and told the press that The Public—and by extension all those in solidarity with the BFT in the US—were *not* supporting a regime change in Belarus.⁷⁵ At the BFT's *Staging A Revolution* festival in London in 2015, the anxiety around regime change emerged again in the post-show discussions with UK audiences. Audiences addressed their lack of knowledge about the political situation in Belarus and worried about intervening in state politics in other countries. Political theater was associated with ideological preoccupations that were unsavory among liberal audiences in the US and UK who were vigilant against imposing direct reforms (see Chapter 1, section “Dis-orientalism at the End of Politics”). Instead, audiences rallied around the BFT as a human rights theater because human rights appealed to general issues of domination rather than the specific context of Belarus. Human rights theater was abstracted toward the universal goal of humanity and diverted from the historical conditions in Belarus. This first problem of political theater for international audiences was a hesitation to promote contestatory politics in a foreign country and resulted in an embrace of ahistorical, universal ideals for solidarity rather than political ends.

Additionally, the BFT had a problem with political theater that acutely affected the company once they emerged on the global stage. Political theater underscored a limited form of international reception for the BFT. Although gaining accolades and financial resources abroad, the company struggled to escape the territorial marker of Belarus. Over and over again their theatrical work was over-determined by the press in relation to state-enforced censorship. Their political commitments were reduced to a wholesale representation of violence, repression and misfortune in Belarus. This ghettoizing

⁷⁵ Shusman and Weaver, “Artists Hold NYC Protest Against Belarus”

discourse of political theater limited not only the reproduced of knowledge about Belarus, but also a limited form of artistic development and evaluation for the company's theatrical work. The BFT was demanded to perform only Belarus-specific content. Their value was circumscribed by a voyeuristic and authentic knowledge they provide about Belarus to international audiences. Additionally, the quality of their theatrical craft was qualified by presumptions about artistic development in Belarus under state-enforced censorship.⁷⁶ Political theater produced a framework of knowledge about the BFT that positioned the company as lacking in artistic merits in counterpart to Western theater collectives. The framework—which I refer to as a *gendered prism of context* in Chapter Two—was a liability for the artistic survival of the BFT. They desired the stage as a human rights theater to escape the over determined association of their work with violence in Belarus.

In this way, the distinction between “political theater” and “human rights theater” presented a rich terrain of struggle between various players such as theatrical institutions, Belarusian and Western audiences, the BFT, the Belarusian state, and press, and BFT's allies and patrons. However, this struggle was rarely discussed in scholarship and journalistic writing about the BFT. Most scholarship on the BFT exclusively considered the company's significance in relationship to the Belarusian state (Bekus: 2010; Elphick: 2014; Gener: 2009). The focus of this work was located squarely on the necessity of the company to speak-out-against the forces of oppression in Belarus. Most representative of this narrative was a 2014 documentary film about the BFT released through HBO titled

⁷⁶ For example, one journalist from *Time Out London* pardoned the retrograde artistic choices in the BFT's production *Minsk 2011* because of the lack of political freedom in the “context” of Belarus (*Time Out London*). See Chapter 2, “Translating Context in Post-Soviet Documentary Theater”.

Dangerous Acts Starring the Unstable Elements in Belarus. The film described the dangerous acts as the “provocative and subversive shows” of the company that happened under the “risk [of] censorship and imprisonment”. The film re-produced an ingrained Cold War prism that decidedly distributed spaces of danger and risk between Belarus and Western Europe and US. What was not clear however was what risks were involved for the BFT as they represented oppression in Belarus to international audiences. Nor was it clear why the BFT was most valuable as a human rights theater internationally instead of other theater companies in Belarus. Indeed, it appeared that this distinction was being erased from sight: the BFT was naturalized as a human rights theater that represented human rights violations in Belarus *at the moment* that they were required to move away from Belarusian politics because of the two problems outlined above (i.e. the anxiety of regime change politics in a post-historical climate and the ghettoizing effect of “political theater” for artists from the fringes of Europe). The BFT was being produced as a human rights theater under pressures of the global arts market but this transformation was invisible. The BFT’s human rights theater required a new framework for analysis missing from the literature about the company. Instead of reading the BFT as a liberatory practice within a nation-state paradigm, this framework addresses the work of the BFT with a focus on the peculiar erasure of politics in international reception.

Summary of Research

Drawing on the case study of the BFT, this dissertation addressed three questions: What was the relationship between translation and human rights theater? What were the normative aesthetic and dramaturgical forms of translation involved in BFT’s

transformation into a human rights theater? Did the BFT employ alternative methods of translation to envision more equitable forms of exchange on the global stage? To answer these questions, I utilized a framework of body-based translation analysis that focused on the translation of aesthetic forms rooted in the body rather than linguistic forms of translation. This framework analyzed the transfer of the BFT's work from one place (Belarus) to another place (the international sphere represented by liberal audiences in the UK/US). Body-based translation analysis examined both the transfer of substance in the BFT's theatrical work and the broader "dramaturgy" of how the BFT's productions were received by various audiences. I analyzed how the substance of BFT's productions changed from one place to another, specifically how the company shaped the body in their work to become legible as human rights theater. Additionally, I drew on contemporary theories of translation that since Jacques Derrida have shifted away from "meaning" toward the performative process of the movement of texts within different spatio-temporal conditions. This form of analysis underscores the broader dramaturgy of the translational exchange between bodies that conditioned human rights theater. This combined framework was designed to grasp both a difference in the construction of the body in representations onstage (as the company altered their work for an international audiences) as well as different forms of bodily relations between groups of audiences (such as Belarusians, neighboring post-Soviet audiences in Ukraine, and cosmopolitan audiences in the UK/US).

Each of the three chapters in this dissertation targeted a core translation issue observed in my fieldwork. "Chapter One: Surviving History" was concerned with the BFT's survival as a political theater once they began to perform outside of Belarus. The

company's value as a political theater was tied to their resistive practice within the context of Belarusian authoritarian rule and the regime of Alexander Lukashenko. As such, the company needed to perpetually address the problem of their relevance as a theater collective outside this context. Frequently, journalists and scholars asked: what will happen to your theater if the political situation in Belarus changes? The company struggled with a looming expiration date for their work that was tied to the timeliness of the political situation in Belarus. Chapter One told the story of the way that the company negotiated the issue of expiration through a ten-year anniversary festival *Staging A Revolution*. This festival substituted, or surrogated, the BFT's political theater pieces into universal values based on a surviving body, an ageless construction of the body that abstracts from the historical conditions of politics. The event of *Staging A Revolution* produced this effect by coupling the BFT's productions with Let's Act discussions that translated the productions into generalized ideals of social justice that were deemed universally accessible (such as women's liberation). During the event, a delicate translation unfolded in gestures of solidarity that extended care for the BFT's survival while transforming them into an ageless body—i.e. the dangerously aging political body was replaced with an ethical ageless body stripped from political issues of life and death. These ageless issues were valued across contexts because they were not specific to the historical context of Belarus. The festival rerouted timely issues of regime change and political direction in Belarus toward timeless, ahistorical ideals to secure international solidarity and negotiate the question of the BFT's expiration date. Importantly, this translation of the BFT's body to human at *Staging A Revolution* did not mean that the productions were altered in any way. In fact, they were for the most part identical to what

the BFT showed in Minsk, Belarus over the course of their ten-year production history from 2005-2015. The broader dramaturgy of the festival unhinged the productions from issues of sovereignty toward a human body through the parameter of survival.

“Chapter Two: The Feminist Translator in the Era of Testimony” addressed the translation issue of “context” in the international reception of the BFT’s work. It examines why the BFT has to continuously answer to, and promote, a specific contextualization for their theater productions. Instead of answering questions about aesthetic choices, the company was asked to account for the possibility of producing their work under harsh conditions in Belarus, conditions determined by state-enforced censorship and political violence in the country. This chapter investigated what specifically in the BFT’s repertoire made them worthy of international attention and how this repertoire was contextualized to create value as human rights. Central to the research was the example of BFT productions *Minsk 2011* and *New York ’79*, the first of which was circulated abroad and well received as a human rights production while the second was only shown in Belarus. This chapter develops that *Minsk 2011* resonated with international audiences as a human rights production because of the testimonial form of the body. This testimonial body was a feminized subject—female bodies and other marginalized subjects—that provided evidence of state abuse by virtue of the authentic, direct and immediate role of their body. Additionally, the dramaturgical form of testimony was not only a format for devising theater, but also a translational exchange between bodies that took a specific form. Chapter Two reveals that *Minsk 2011* was not necessarily a piece of Human Rights Theater. It was relevant to one audience as human rights while to a Belarusian audience it was relevant as a political theater piece that

expressed non-statist dimensions of subjectivity, what political scientist Nelly Bekus and theater critic Pavel Rudnev cite as the political role of verbatim forms of theater.

Critically, the production existed in both the state of “political theater” and “human rights theater” simultaneously.

“Chapter Three: Executing the Crying Onion” revealed the deliberate way that the BFT altered their theater work after the company’s exile in 2013. They changed the way they envisioned the body in their production *Trash Cuisine* in order to combat issues they faced when they began to produce work in the UK. These issues were racializing and anti-immigrant sentiments expressed through the limitations placed on their theater craft, specifically negative reactions around their desire to make theater projects that did *not* solely feature narratives of Belarusian feminized subject on the far edges of society. The normative protocol of translation gave them authority to perform Belarus for global audiences but also required that they not veer too far from that particular script.

Circumscribing a company within the particular context is a colonial tactic that provides non-Westerners with empirical knowledge of their “home” for the benefit of Western knowledge expansion. This colonial tactic matters as those who provided this particular and empirical knowledge are restricted from discussing universal and theoretical knowledge. In theater terms, the BFT were restricted from depicting global issues outside of Belarus and, once they did, were threatened to “go back where you came from” (see Chapter 3, “Human Rights RealPolitik”). *Trash Cuisine* responded to the demand placed on the company by envisioning an alternative that disassociated from the logic of identity in favor of a sensation-based body. The “dramaturgy of sensation” that the BFT employed undid the solidity of the body that created positions of Self/Other in favor of a

relational dynamic. This was a solution for the BFT to combat the issue of the particular, contained identity-based body in liberal human rights discourse.

Taken together, these three chapters present BFT's field of struggle with the protocols of human rights theater production on the global stage. They address the historical demands of these protocols (survival, testimony, sensation) and the stakes associated with becoming a human rights theater.

Stakes of Research

Anti-Translational Problem in Human Rights Theater

This dissertation identified a type of translation at work in BFT's human rights theater that was *anti-translational*—i.e. translation was erased in the act of translation. The transformation of “political theater” into “human rights theater” relied on a construction of a liberal human body. This body was predicated on an ideal human body that was whole, integrated and individual. This notion of a whole, integrated and individual body was the key that provided universal access between spaces (Belarus and UK/US). The body was specific to every individual and therefore universal despite different historical and political contexts. Additionally, the body of human rights needed to be a feminized subject that provided their body as evidence of human rights violations. While the feminized subject confessed to rights violations in the form of testimony, what was important was not the speech itself but the claim to authentic experience that the body provided.

However, it is the case that those that provided the testimonies of violence, such as the BFT, were not those who possessed the liberal human body but those that lacked this body. Their bodies were fragmented, broken and/or defiled, the opposite of integrated and whole. They were not fully human – or to put it more concretely, existing in a state that anticipated becoming human. This is precisely why the feminized body was featured as the subject of human rights theater. The feminized body was integrated within the social structure and lacking in human rights. The chapters in this dissertation address how the aesthetic and dramaturgical forms of survival and testimony promise to restore or remedy violence through the feminized subject. In traditional forms of translation the female body is made invisible to transmit knowledge across space — requiring the presence of the female body while also assuring its disappears as a neutral and transparent vessel of transportation for the reproduction of knowledge. In contrast, the bodies of the BFT were visible as both victims and translators. But in becoming visible — again, the privilege of the feminized body — their role as translators were hidden from sight in favor of stories of victimization they authored and legitimated through their body. The translating labor of the body was erased to produce a hyper visible body that was universally accessible. Therefore, the human body did not seem to need a translator.

The body-based function of translation differs from theories of linguistic translation that guided my research. Scholars such as Naoki Sakai and Shalden Tageldin have highlighted the colonial function of translation to distribute and separate spaces while purporting to provide a connective “bridge”. Linguistic translations in both international (Sakai) and colonial (Tageldin) forms secure territories proper and are tied to the historical and political conditions that underpin sovereignty and land acquisitions. The

exchange of linguistic texts therefore imagined territorial differences that needed to be bridged. In contrast, the translation of the BFT onto the global stage as a human rights theater did not “bridge” two linguistically bound territories, but connected the BFT to a universal ideal of the human body that existed in excess of the nation-state of Belarus. Instead of a political and historical space this translation into a human rights theater was ethical and ahistorical – it was an abstracted, generalized site of oppression of feminized subjects. The body was a powerful tool in the construction of this ahistorical and ethical space of universality. The body was made hyper visible in human rights theater because it sidestepped the linguistic register in two ways: First the body was perceived as a universal. Everyone has a body. Unlike language, it was not regarded as a product of social-cultural difference. Secondly, the body could register what was common to all of humanity: pain. The body registered the “unspeakability” of violence and made it understandable for all. The body – much more than language – was the privileged site through which the BFT became a human rights theater because it did not need a translator.

However, the parameters through which the normative human body was produced in the work of the BFT did not mean that everyone fit equally into the narrative of humanity. While the ethical ideal of human rights was universal it was also the case that not everyone had these rights. The feminized body produced the distinction between liberal and illiberal contexts as the BFT became spokespeople for rights lacking in Belarus. The anti-translational character of the body naturalizes this prism of knowledge production by erasing the site of its politics: the labor that the female body enacts to testify to her audience. In turn, what might be considered female empowerment becomes

a form of discrimination. In theater terms, the feminized subject that lacks rights is a limited field in which the BFT is demanded to only perform Belarus.

Additionally, the anti-translational character of the liberal body creates a flexible value of survival that did not need to be tied to a specific context. In *Staging A Revolution* the human body was the production of a generalized notion of survival rather than a contestable political one. There was no possibility for translation mistakes because humanity, as an ethical ideal, was not a debatable or controversial question. This was a refuge for audiences because it allowed them to provide care while sidestepping the dangers of expressing solidarity with the BFT as a political issue of regime. However, a care for the ageless human body also kept integration out of reach for the BFT. The BFT is a privileged producer within a specific political economy of survival where they produce a human body in order to stay viable as a theater collective outside of Belarus. The benefactors of this political economy of survival are not as much the BFT as much as the liberal audiences who care for the surviving body of the BFT. The dislocation of the BFT from the historical and political context of Belarus affords them a position to speak to abuses around the world. Most importantly, it allows the company to speak to abuses *within* the UK. The utility of this is revealed at *Staging A Revolution* where the BFT is called on to test the liberal character of UK audiences in a moment where it is fragile—in *Staging A Revolution* this fragility revolves around the xenophobic attitudes in the UK around the Syrian refugee crisis and the UK's "problem" with political correctness that limit freedoms (see Chapter 1, "The Aging Theater"). The BFT therefore re-center liberal character at the moment that it is threatened *in* the UK. In this case, the BFT does important work in the UK when liberal character is threatened rather than self-assured.

The BFT does this because they are “refugees” located on a social margin who can claim authentic experience with oppression and near extinction. And, importantly, they do this best because the issues they are able to authentically claim – and remedy for liberal audiences—are ones that do not threaten the racial character of British liberalism. The “human” body restores the moral character of liberal audiences through a strategy that does not engage either a racial or colonial history of the body. The company is perfectly suited for masking historical racial issues within the UK. *Staging A Revolution* reveals is the labor that the BFT provides as the “perfect other” to drive a racial and colonial strategy in global human rights theater: by multiple sites of human rights violations they create a field of generalized social justice issues that are emptied of politics. A reductive form of humanitarianism that extends care to the BFT in order to keep alive, and prompt up, the invisible white center of liberal discourse.

Translation as Decolonizing Methodology in Human Rights Theater

If the normative form of translation in human rights theater is anti-translational, what might it mean to imagine translation differently? This dissertation evokes the case of the BFT’s repertoire to propose that contemporary human rights theater practice re-invest in translation as a decolonizing methodology.

In *Trash Cuisine* the BFT employed a “dramaturgy of sensation” that was specifically focused on disassociating from a feminized subjectivity of Belarusian victimhood. *Trash Cuisine* was a response to the production of a limited human body that called on the BFT to perform the particular Belarusian context and that used this to produce a liberal/illiberal spectrum of discrete contexts. The “dramaturgy of sensation”

responded to the problem by embracing a universal body that undid the hierarchy of savior/saved in human rights relations. The universal body was in this case different than the human body that created stable positions for who have/lack human rights. The production featured stories of human rights from the UK/US (i.e. the Euro-American center) and it also promoted a version of a body that was sensorial rather than identity-based. The sensorial body was set in relation with other bodies to disturb the Self/Other dichotomy. What was underscored was a universal connection through the materiality of sensation – literally the physical dimensions of food in *Trash Cuisine*.

However the “dramaturgy of sensation” presented some issues. The material connectivity re-affirmed the universality of humanity’s interconnectedness without attending to the historical and political dimensions of how bodies are differentiated through this connectivity. Visually and aesthetically the production underscored a post-racial and post-linguistic relation between bodies. The Belarusian actors onstage were muted by the demands to perform the production in English. The multi-national and multi-racial feature of the casting of *Trash Cuisine* reduced to a flattened out image of diversity that favored an ethical position of humanity across historical and cultural divides. While the sensorial body pushed the BFT to reject the tyranny of the feminized and individualized subject in the reception of their work, the sensational body in *Trash Cuisine* did not provide a method through which to treat the differentiation of a global demographic.

Often a lack of historical difference is treated in human rights theater discussions as a call for more “context” in the theater production to balance out what Christina Wilson calls the “erotics of testimony”. This dissertation argues that contextualization

was a tool that over determined the BFT's human rights work with state-enforced violence. Instead, I found the labor of female translator most productive for re-considering human rights theater. The work of translation dislodged the focus on the individual feminized subject because the work of the translator was relational and strategically located between bodies. The translator was precisely the site that undid the ideal of an integrated and individual that underpins liberal discourse of human rights by insisting on historical relationships of how the repertoire circulates and for whom. In other words, a feminist approach to translation would focus away from simply a female-oriented subjectivity toward the politics of the exchange of productions, i.e. repertoire. A relational approach rejects the "lacking" projection that Walter Dignolo describes as the backbone of racializing "legal colonial difference" by connecting productions in multi-directional address (Dignolo 12).

How does the female translator change the way we create and watch human rights theater? I would like to revisit the exchange of BFT productions *Minsk 2011* and *New York '79*. *Minsk 2011* was positioned as a representation of political and social violence in "Minsk in 2011" through the lens of sexuality. Although this production depicted the context of oppression in Belarus it was actually produced in London, England and was only shown in Minsk after its world premiere. This meant that the *site of production* and the *direction of the address* that make up the process of exchange complicate what is considered "local context" in the production itself. Whereas *New York '79*, which was shown only in Minsk and never shown abroad, depicted a foreign context but was actually more local when you considered the translational exchange of the BFT's repertoire. This methodology of translation undid the assumption that the BFT's

repertoire was “parallel” or unchanging between Belarus and the UK. The way that the BFT’s repertoire was adapted, revised and altered to suit a global audience told a much more complicated story of exchange than local resistance and global co-optation. Neither universal nor particular, the body is relational. The relationality of translation does not establish an ethical universality but articulates the historical ways that alliances and connections are produced and for whom. Repertoire is instructive because there are multiple productions in the BFT’s ten-year oeuvre that respond to different audiences. It is also instructive because repertoire enacts a set of simultaneous relations that allow a production such as *New York ’79* to have a distinctly local flavor despite its foreign context. Therefore the question is not whether an individual production is “political theater” and “human rights theater”, but what is the politics of the exchange of the BFT’s productions and who do they benefit. Translation provides for simultaneously occurring forms of address that means that no single BFT production is more or less political than another. Nor is there a production that is more or less about human rights.

While a normative form of human rights translation relies on an anti-translational ethos, the feminist translator inserts the laboring body into the equation. The feminized subject that speaks testimonial is rarely constructed as working—indeed the work of translation is erased as the hyper visible body emerges as either an authentic confession of the body or a lacking body of rights that is not able to speak. When the body is working it is working tirelessly to survive under the conditions of human rights exchange. And yet this labor is never accounted for as a condition of human rights production and global forces. While the feminized body is made hyper visible in the testimonial exchange, the labor of the body is hidden from sight or relegated to simply a refrain that

underscores the survival narrative of the BFT. The feminist translator makes visible the work of translation as labor to account for the material dimensions of the interconnectivity of global solidarity. This would require a focus on the intensified speed of turn-around and the work to create virtual experiences that gave UK audiences a taste of the “danger” of producing the BFT’s work in Belarus. Producing universality is not just the production of a human body as an ideal or aesthetic but also a laborious process. I was reminded of this labor on a daily basis in my fieldwork as I watched the BFT negotiate the flows of people, money and materials between places, and respond to the press and to my requests. The feminist translator provides a decolonizing framework that emphasizes how the BFT’s work (both aesthetically and materially) articulates the pressures of going global rather than a nation-state paradigm.

A decolonizing methodology for the study of human rights in theater production begins with a lesson from the feminist translator, whose multi-directional labor compromises the normative (and patriarchal) unilateral and developmental framework of rights discourse. Whereas the aforementioned 2014 documentary *Dangerous Acts Staring the Unstable Elements in Belarus* revealed the dangers and risks of producing theater under state enforced censorship, a decolonizing methodology requires a careful repositioning of spaces to address the interplay between the local/global and the particular/universal. The feminist translator might confess to local political oppression but she does this in negotiation with the risks and dangers involved in going “global”. To decolonize human rights the binary hierarchies of rights discourses shift in favor of relational and historical production between bodies. The repertoire, rather than the individual theater production, will become key to human rights theater scholarship as the

repertoire forces multi-directional engagement with the global circulation of theater productions.

A decolonizing methodology also recognizes that there is a fundamental simultaneity of meaning in the repertoire that cannot be reduced to “the same” (which produces a developmental framework of humanity). My research with the BFT revealed that the company was produced as a human rights theater. The BFT’s festival *Staging A Revolution* made visible the transformation of the political body of the BFT into a human body where theater productions such as *Time of Women* were re-routed to address the ageless body of humanity in the post-show discussion. In this way, a decolonizing methodology would acknowledge the essential movement of repertoire and therefore the possibility of the body to be constructed, and politicized, in more than one way. This is critical since recent scholarship on the historical dimensions of human rights have positioned the post-1970s era as an “exceptional period” of human rights guided by a moral calculus stripped of revolutionary politics and political options—essentially an international agenda that only has one side and as a result produces no practical change (Moyn 49). For Moyn, this period—in which “we” still find ourselves—might only end when “the need for contestatory political options may once again seem the most relevant one to meet” (Moyn 51). While Moyn is critical of the current human rights regime, he relies on a vision of a future period where politics might again arise. In contrast, the feminist translator acknowledges not one historical moment—and by extension its developmental future—but co-existing temporalities. Humanity is not so much a “status quo” in theater productions as much as a dynamic relational repertoire that could be *both* political or human rights. Decolonizing human rights theater makes it necessary that we

engage with the current moment in multidirectional and relational way to understand how different groups of people negotiate global pressures. Indeed, the feminist translator has always known that the global stage is a theatrical process and not a given reality.

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